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"BEHOLD THIS HEART"

The Story of

ST. MARGARET MARY ALACOQUE

BY

REV. H. J. HEAGNEY



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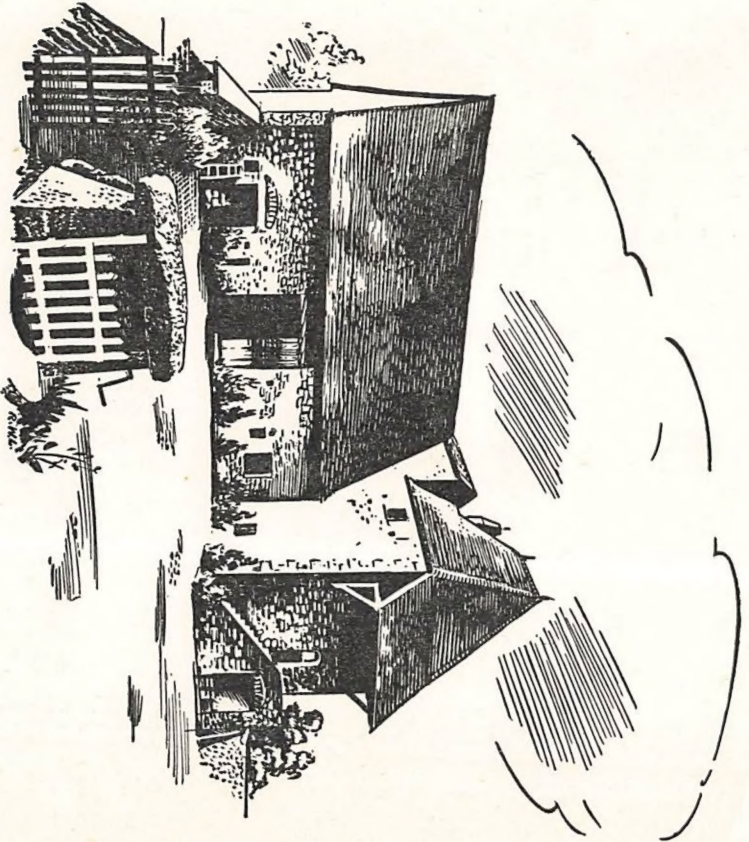
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The Chosen Paul



Chautecour

I

Toussaint Delaroche was walking slowly up from the lower field. He was a broad, powerful man, not unlike the huge white oxen for which the district of Charollais was famous. He stopped to gaze into the western sky, and a hopeful expression lit his tired face, for huge masses of clouds were piling up on the horizon. It might rain, Toussaint was not certain with the face of the heavens presenting so odd an appearance.

The scenic effect was grand and sombre; the colors—mauve, red and saffron—all moving and melting together, formed a strange, exciting tapestry. Toussaint, however, was not artistic; his practical nature was stirred by the hope of moisture for the withering crops.

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"Uncle Toussaint, Uncle Toussaint," cried a childish voice, soft and clear in the still evening air. Toussaint turned his head, his large, bovine eyes looked up towards an immense granite rock. Perched on the top was his wife's little niece, Margaret.

"Get down off that rock!" he exclaimed. "Do you want to kill yourself?"

"Oh, no, no, I've been up here lots of times," laughed the child. "Do climb up, uncle. Look at the sky, it's lovely."

Toussaint relaxed. That little rascal, Margaret, she was everywhere on the farm! One could not be angry with her; after all, she was not much more than an infant, and what an infant! Around the base of the tremendous stone darted her brother, Chrysostom, a sturdy lad of six.

"Will it rain, uncle? Come and see our playhouse."

Toussaint patted his head. "I have no time, my boy; I must see that the cows are milked or the lazy maids will neglect it. And if it does not rain soon, your father will have to buy all our food next fall and winter. Now climb up and stay with your little sister but don't forget to be home for supper."

"But I grow tired up there. Margaret says the sky is heaven and she is watching to see if an angel will come out of those colored clouds."

Good children, reflected Toussaint, as he strode over the parched fields toward Lhautecour. It stood on the brow of a hill and he could see the two towers of the old stone houses sticking up over the oak forest. The more pretentious dwelling to the left was the home of Margaret's parents, the Alacoques. There her father, Claude, who was Toussaint's brother-in-law, had his law office and transacted his business while at home. He was often away, since his duties as magistrate for the manorial estates of the landed nobility of the neighborhood kept him on the road a great part of the time.

On the opposite side of a courtyard stood the original farm home, where Toussaint lived with his wife—she was Claude's sister, Benoite—and their little son, Jean. A younger Alacoque sister, Catherine, stayed with them. Generations of Delaroches had dwelt within these ancient yet solid walls, for though Claude Alacoque was the proprietor of Lhautecour, it had come into the possession of his family through a marriage with a Delaroche years before.

As Toussaint came into the yard he heard the creaking of the windlass in the large circular well. His wife was pulling on the thick ropes with energy, drawing up from the icy depths pails of cream and butter that had been left to cool in shelves along the sides of the well. Old Jeanette, the Alacoque's servant, was handing the pails to Catherine, who carried the contents to the house to be used for the evening meal.

Toussaint gazed with satisfaction on their efforts and a smile lifted the corners of his wide mouth, outlining the little wrinkles around his eyes. That Jeanette, what a worker! It made up for her crabbed disposition, though he did not see why Claude's wife put up with her. But then Philiberte was so easy going, she did not have enough backbone to dismiss a servant so long in service, no matter how ill-tempered.

Toussaint paused on his way to the shed where the cows were standing, patiently waiting for the dried hay and feed. Chickens, geese and ducks clustered around him, waiting to be fed. The bucolic scene pleased him. Now, if only Claude were back with the new team he had promised to bring, Toussaint would be really happy. For months he had been asking his brother-in-law about a strong, sturdy team of big horses. Perhaps this time Claude might have attended to the matter.

"What are you thinking about, Toussaint?" asked his wife. Her voice was sarcastic. "Surely you don't expect

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Claude to bring you a good team of horses so you can plow new fields, build fences and haul wood?"

"Yes, that's just what I was thinking about. You read my mind, Benoite," replied her husband. "You are a clever woman."

"Not very clever," answered Benoite, a malicious look crossing her face. "But at least I realize that my dear brother cares nothing for the farm, as you should know by now."

"But that's impossible!" exclaimed Toussaint. "It's his place. A man always is interested in his own lands."

"It's our place as much as his," retorted his wife bitterly. "If it were not for you, everything would go back to the wilderness."

Toussaint shook his head. "No, Benoite, that is not just. Claude inherited Lhautecour. It belongs to him and his children after him." Catherine leaned back and laughed scornfully. She was tall like her sister but thin, while Benoite was plump and comely. Both were grey-eyed and dark-haired, but the younger sister lacked Benoite's vital assurance. Some years before she had been disappointed in love and, though still in her late twenties, was growing into an embittered spinster.

"Claude's children will have nothing to inherit," she said. "He is completely under his wife's influence. The money he could use wisely is thrown away on foolish presents."

"Oh, it's almost unbearable to see the waste and extravagance that goes on under one's nose," sighed Benoite, tears of vexation springing to her eyes. "Our brother has no business sense about money. He makes it easily and spends recklessly. Philiberte manages him in her own sly way."

"Don't talk like that," said her husband. "It is only a waste of time."

"Waste," snorted Benoite. "On Claude's last trip he spent enough on clothes to buy a wonderful team."

Toussaint went plodding forward to the cows. Cows

were nice creatures, he felt at home with them. He began spreading the hay and carrying the water. The mild, liquid eyes of the cows were grateful. He felt a kinship with them. At least they did not gabble like women. Benoite and Catherine had spoken the truth, though. The Alacoques might have a profitable estate instead of this rundown, neglected place. But then, what could one do about it? 'And why bring it up forever? It was like the weather, nothing could be done about it. Sometimes he spoke to his brother-in-law, but he was unsuccessful in gaining his point. Yes, yes, of course, Claude would agree and make extravagant promises, but nothing was accomplished. One cannot build, repair, buy stock, on mere promises.

Coming out of the shed, he heard the thudding of hoofs off in the distance. It must be Claude and by the increasing sound this was a team and wagon. Yet Claude had rode away from Lhautecour on his saddle-horse. Toussaint smiled. Incredible as it seemed, Claude had bought the horses. He went unhurriedly down to the rustic arched gateway to meet his brother-in-law. There was plenty of time, for sound carried far in the thin, dry atmosphere. He heard the hollow reverberation as the horses trotted over the wooden bridge which crossed the steep rivulet, rushing down from the heights above. A fine team, he reflected, they move along with spirit. He rubbed his hands in satisfaction, the future was bright, and for the moment he forgot the severe drought which had burned the grass and crops. From the distance there came the sweet chiming of the evening bell, tolling the Angelus in the village church of Verosvres. Toussaint stood still and crossed himself.

Others were listening to that same bell. Philiberte Alacoque arose heavily from her chair, where she was sewing on a layette for the child she was expecting in a few months. The maidservants and laborers laid aside their tasks; Father Antoine, the parish priest, put away his breviary to

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stand in prayer. High on the rock, little Margaret rose from a reclining position, folded her chubby hands and bent her dark, curly head. Below, Chrysostom stopped his labors. He was making a little altar as near alike in design as the altar where his uncle, Father Antoine, celebrated Mass. The steady peal of the bell ceased momentarily and there came the last few strokes which ended the Angelus.

Margaret unfolded her hands and again looked up at the clouds. For hours she had been gazing at the changing formations. Chrysostom thought her idea of an angel appearing was highly improbable, but he did admit that their Guardian Angels were at their sides while they played. So it was not impossible that God would permit a third angel to fly through those beautiful colored banners which covered heaven.

Now a startled expression flashed across the child's face as a last gleam of the sun touched the spire of the church, which was plainly visible from the high elevation of the great rock. The clouds suddenly swirled away and a gorgeous, regal red cloud formed directly over the tall cross which topped the church. Margaret could not restrain her emotion at this extraordinary spectacle. She ran to the edge of the rock to summon her brother when suddenly the whole sky over the church became immobile. The red cloud was transformed into a heart, a ruby, pulsing heart. Margaret stood as if held by some invisible force. The sheer beauty of that heart was like the pang of ecstasy in her own. In the church below was the Adorable One, and it seemed that He spoke to her through the flaming glory of that tremendous scene in the heavens. She stretched out her arms and a swooning happiness surged through her. . . .

* * * *

Down by the gate, Toussaint watched the turn in the lane eagerly, for he was most desirous of seeing his new

horses. A look of keen disappointment came into his eyes when a carriage appeared, a magnificent vehicle with armorial bearings. Toussaint had seen it many times, also he knew well that spirited team and the coachman driving them. It was the carriage of the Countess de Fautrieres of Corcheval. Seated beside her was Claude Alacoque. Strange, thought Toussaint, for the countess to pay a visit, especially with night coming on, for she was in poor health and seldom went anywhere.

"Ah, my good Toussaint!" cried Claude, as the coachman pulled his horses to a halt, "it is a pleasure to have you meet us."

Delaroche bowed to the countess, who returned his somewhat awkward salute with an affable smile, and invited him to ride with them. A footman sprang down from his place beside the driver and guided the team through the entrance gate.

"How is my wife?" asked Alacoque in a low voice.

"Very good," said Toussaint. "She spends her time sewing and saying her prayers. Her only trial is that she cannot go to Mass, but Father Antoine comes frequently."

"And the children?"

"All splendid. I just left the two little ones at the big rock where they have their playhouse."

"My little tomboy," laughed the countess fondly. "It will be quite a change for her at Corcheval, surrounded by sedate grownups, instead of romping in the fields with her brothers. Perhaps it is selfish of me to take her."

"No, dear lady," interrupted Claude, "Margaret will be greatly benefited by her stay at the chateau, and it is very kind of you to want her."

"I shall be most benefited," insisted the countess. "What a tonic she will be to a lonely old woman!"

"Then little Margaret is leaving Lhautecour?" exclaimed Toussaint in astonishment.

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"Her godmother has invited her to pay her a long visit," explained Claude, "but Corcheval is only a league away, so it will not be like leaving home."

"I want it to be another home for her," broke in the countess warmly.

"And so it shall be," said Claude, "for she loves you like another mother."

The great coach rumbled up to the stone steps of the Alacoque home and Claude helped the countess to alight. He was a tall, handsome man; his movements were exceedingly graceful, his manner courteous, genial, and self-possessed. The fact that he was a judge and associated with the nobility did not account for these characteristics. They were natural to him, as was the way of life which the Delaroches with their rustic frugality found so excessively annoying. The Alacoques, it was true, were neither noble nor wealthy but they had been honorable land-owners since the fifteenth century, a most unusual prerogative in this year 1651 when most of the land was still in the possession of the nobility and farmed by tenants.

The de Fautrieres and Alacoque families had been neighbors for a century and a half, yet it was more than this ancient tie which had prompted Margaret de Fautrieres to become the godmother of the child who was her namesake. She admired Claude and was fond of his gently bred wife, whose father was a Royal Notary of the old city of Macon, a few miles distant. Claude, too, had been a Royal Notary before his judicial appointments. The countess was devoted to her small godchild, who was the center of her affection, for her husband was dead, and her son and only child was married and no longer lived at Corcheval.

Her unexpected visit caused a commotion in the Lhautecour household. Benoite and Catherine rushed about, supervising the preparation of a quick but bounteous meal, although the countess protested that she was not at all hungry. Madame Alacoque was quite helpless in the midst

of hurrying maidservants. The reason for the noble lady's visit did not cause her any elation, but it took little persuasion on her husband's part to make her see what an advantage it would be for their small daughter.

"And where is my precious lamb?" asked the Countess, her fading eyes lit with a glow of anticipation.

In the general excitement the child had been forgotten. "I trust nothing is wrong," said her mother anxiously.

"Nothing is wrong with Margaret," interrupted Catherine. "She is either hiding or down below the barn. I never saw such an active creature!"

"She is a difficult child," said Benoit. "You will have one less to worry about, Philiberte."

"Ah, but that's a mother's life," sighed Philiberte.

"Do not worry, dear wife," said Claude fondly. "I shall go myself and find her. It will give me a chance to break the news to her."

Alaquoque went out in the gathering dusk. He was not alarmed about his small daughter; Chrysostom, that faithful little brother would take good care of her despite his tender years. Besides, Lhautecour was a peaceful spot but perhaps it would be better, indeed, for Margaret to stay at Corcheval. As her godmother had reminded him, she was an only girl, growing up among three brothers and allowed to run wild, for he was often away and poor Philiberte unable to look after her properly. If her older sister, Catherine, had lived, she would be eight now and a suitable companion for the little one, but Catherine had died in infancy and so, too, had Gilberte, their third daughter.

When Claude reached the meadow he called in a loud voice: "Chrysostom, Margaret, where are you?" Down by the large rock he heard their childish voices answering. Soon two little bodies were pressed against his, and four small arms hugged him tightly. "Come, my pets, we are late for dinner. The Countess is here."

"My godmother!" said Margaret in a glad voice.

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"Yes," said her father, picking her up and placing her on his shoulder. "Would you like to take a ride in your god-mother's big carriage?"

"Oh, that would be nice, papa."

"Can I go, too?" asked Chrysostom eagerly.

"Not this time, son, but I'll take you with me next time. What kept you so very late, children? Don't you know you must always be on time? When you are grown up like me, you will understand that time is a great thing."

"Oh, yes, papa," answered the boy, "but it wasn't our fault. Margaret fell asleep up on top of that big rock, and I waited until she woke up."

"I see," said their father, "but, Margaret, you must not sleep on a rock. Suppose you rolled off and fell?"

"I wouldn't let her," stated Chrysostom manfully.

"You are a good boy," said his father, "but suppose Margaret was all by herself. What then?"

"But I wouldn't let her be alone," went on Chrysostom. "I am always with her, even though sometimes she runs away. I can always find her."

Margaret chuckled. "When I'm big he won't be able to catch me, papa."

"What a fortunate man I am!" thought Claude Alacoque, as he walked along in the gloaming. "These two little darlings and my others, truly they are gifts, most precious, of the Good God. And now my little girl is going to Corcheval, that is a great blessing. There she will live in beauty and splendor with the kindest of women."

Yes, Margaret's future looked bright and besides it would be one less responsibility for his overburdened wife. His mind ran on in hopeful channels until they reached the low gate of the courtyard, where he put Margaret on the ground. Lights streaming from the windows showed the way for her tiny feet. "Now remember, chérie, no more sleeping on rocks at night."

"But I wasn't asleep at all, papa."

"Yes, you were," said Chrysostom. "Right after the church bell rang you fell sound asleep and I waited until you woke up."

"I wasn't asleep," insisted Margaret, "oh, really I wasn't. I saw a heart in the sky, just over the cross on the church. It was so beautiful!"

"Come, come, my darling baby," laughed her father, "you were asleep all the time."

"No, no," went on Margaret, her large eyes shining and her full lips determined. "When you sleep you don't know anything, or maybe you dream, but this wasn't like that."

"Never mind now," smiled Claude, watching her bright face and dark curls with affection. "We must not keep god-mother waiting. Let us hurry." She was a queer little thing, he reflected, but most lovable, far beyond her years in many ways. Usually she would have rushed ahead, screaming with delight to meet the countess, but tonight she was in an odd mood.

The dining-table was bright with candles and gay with flowers. The countess, radiant despite her delicate health and the unaccustomed journey, had the post of honor at her host's right hand; next to her, in a high chair, was her godchild. Laughter and pleasant conversation ran around the board.

"You see, I am young again," remarked the countess, "I am making a night of it. God has been very good to me and therefore I feel quite happy. I assure you, Philiberte, your letting me have Margaret will never be forgotten."

Madame Alacoque ate very little, although she had reconciled herself with the parting. The advantages would be great, and then it was such a short distance away that really there would be no separation. Margaret would acquire many accomplishments at the big, beautiful château, and probably would learn to curb a certain wild boisterousness

of nature. She would, perhaps, become a great lady and live in Paris. There was no end to the possibilities.

Watching his wife's face, Claude viewed with satisfaction the dreamy contentment written thereon. Philiberte was facile, sweet, and had little will of her own. If only Benoit had some of that in her nature! He despatched a servant to the wine cellar. Tonight they would drink only the finest vintage. It was a gala occasion and everyone at Lhautecour must be happy, down to the lowliest servant on the place.

"What a shame!" whispered Catherine to Benoit. "Claude grows more extravagant every day."

"His pockets are forever full and empty like a balloon," agreed her sister. "He has emptied the larders for this silly feast and tomorrow these maids and laborers will want to sleep late."

Claude rose with a glass of wine in his strong, delicate fingers. "To Madame la Comtesse, the fairy godmother."

There was much cheering and clapping of hands. In the midst of all this jollity Father Antoine appeared, a wide smile on his benevolent countenance. Though brother to Claude, there was little physical resemblance and none in mind or manners. The cure was fat and careless. An old soutane, faded and patched, covered his heavy frame. His eyes were grey and small, with a twinkling gleam like an elf. He sat down between his nephews, Jean, the eldest, who was eleven, and Philbert, a year younger, and began eating with gusto.

"What splendid wine, my dear brother!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips. "Ah, the very essence of the grape, distilled in the warm dry air of these mountains. Philiberte, you must drink more. It is good for you in your condition, an excellent tonic."

How like Antoine, thought Claude, he is as rude as a swineherd at times, yet his heart is soft and melting as a maiden's. Philiberte blushed at the remark directed so cas-

ually about her pregnancy but her brother-in-law was now talking to the countess in his loud voice. "I shall celebrate Mass at Corcheval tomorrow, Countess. It is necessary to renew the Host."

"Then I'll send the carriage for you, Father," answered the countess.

"No, I shall walk. I am getting too fat," laughed the priest. "It will do me good."

"Does Jesus live at godmother's house, Father?" asked Margaret.

"He dwells there in the Sacrament in a lovely little chapel," replied Father Antoine.

"I shall be glad to talk to Him. Today on the big rock, when the sun was almost gone, Jesus made a big heart come out on top of the cross."

"Have you been climbing up on that big rock again?" asked her uncle. "Didn't I tell you not to do that?"

"Yes, Father, but I'm four years old now."

"Four years old! Why, you are a helpless old woman," laughed the cure.

"We climb up there nearly every day," said Chrysostom. "I like to look around but Margaret looks at the cross. She says Jesus is down in the church. I think she talks to Him."

Father Antoine's small eyes twinkled with delight. "What wisdom, here is the very nature of prayer. All the smart theologians could not put it better. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings."

"Jesus speaks without a voice," said Margaret. "It was good of Him to make that big Heart on top of the cross. It was His own Heart, I'm sure."

"No, my pretty," said Father Antoine, "it was only a cloud."

Margaret shook her head and a stubborn expression appeared on her childish face. "It was not like other clouds,

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Father. Jesus made it. He wanted me to see His Heart, and I could not stop looking at it."

"What a fanciful little angel!" remarked the countess to Margaret's mother. "She transforms nature into a religion. The religious person sees religion in everything. Your daughter has a remarkable mind for one so young."

But Father Antoine was laughing heartily at the child's earnestness. "Why would Jesus want to show you His Heart? No, my little lamb, it was only a cloud. When you grow big you will know that Jesus is in the Sacrament and in Heaven. That is all our religion teaches."

Corcheval

II

The mistress of Corcheval gazed at herself in the mirror, well pleased with Annette's graceful hairdressing.

"Ah, my lady, you are beautiful!" exclaimed made-moiselle, clasping her shapely hands in a dramatic gesture and tossing back her own dark curls, while she closed her large brown eyes.

The countess smiled, though her head was beginning to ache. She dreaded those first pains which soon would develop into a stabbing agony. "I'm not beautiful at all, Annette. Old ladies are not objects of admiration. Now you are young and pretty and gay. Of course, being young, you do not realize it."

In the reflection of the huge mirror, the countess saw her

image, a pale, fragile figure, whose faded eyes were large in the narrow, thin face. Little blue veins crossed the white skin about the temples, the nose curved in Roman mold above a sensitive mouth. "Yes, I am really old," thought the countess.

Her mind flashed back and she saw a wild, frolicsome girl, riding a spirited horse. "How strange life is," she mused pensively. "It scarcely seems possible that once I was filled with a mad vivacity of living. Ogling beaux from the great houses of France sighed when I approached. And here I am alone—alone in my castle—gone the hunting horses, the hounds, the great dances and dinners."

Suddenly she thought of her small godchild, whose visit had lengthened into two years. Margaret had come into her life and made it pleasant. It was singular to be the godmother of such a rare little creature. Here was one to hand down the best traditions of the French nobility. Claude Alacoque, though not of the peerage, was of a most respected line and boasted a coat-of-arms. And where could one find a better man, a truer friend, than Margaret's father, the judge? The child herself gave promise of special talent and a certain gallantry of heart, easily discernible though she was but six years old. And then, such a religious spirit!

One might read there something of the future. One must be religious to give the country a proper place in the shifting whirlpools of this seventeenth century, when so many of the nobles had left their baronial halls to live in the artificial atmosphere of Paris and the court of the Regency, exchanging their sturdy virtues for superficial worldliness.

The code of the countess was simple and strict. A noble was a noble by the providence of God and the rank entailed severe obligations. Tenants and menials must be treated with patience and kindness; their problems of sickness, death, were squarely placed on the noble's shoulders.

Society, consisting of Church and State, received its strength from the principles of noblesse oblige. In the hands of the aristocrats was the trust imposed by God of leading good lives and ruling with justice and mercy. If they were recreant God would punish them with terrible vengeance. Therefore, a noble must live on his land, be loyal to Church and country and be prepared to shed his blood for the honor of both.

The countess tilted her head slightly to gain a better vision of the coiffure arranged by the deft fingers of Annette. The girl was a treasure, her laughter and extravagant mannerisms were a delightful offset to old Mathilde, who was growing more crabbed every year. Often times she was positively rude in her behavior.

One of the petty problems which vexed the countess was Margaret's preference for Mathilde. Try as she might in odd moments to solve the question, the countess could never discover the child's reason. Annette adored her god-daughter and was forever showering her amiable affections upon her, yet Margaret had an aversion to the kindly creature and turned away from her demonstrative attentions. And Mathilde was severe with Margaret, often scolding her in a high, nasal tone and forever finding fault with her.

The little pains in her head were beginning to increase, and she regretted that she could not take a walk in the park with Margaret. Today would be one of her bad days. She sighed, but managed a smile for Annette who came from her dressing room with a shimmering silken dress. "Do wear this, my lady. It will be perfect with the sun shining through the green leaves. You will be adorable."

The door at the other end of the boudoir opened and Mathilde came in, walking softly like an old grey cat. Mathilde was a thin, tall person; she made no sound as she went from room to room. Now her harsh eyes lit with

anger as she observed Annette holding the lovely gown before their mistress.

"My child," said the countess, "why don't you keep the dress? It suits your youth and pretty face."

"Oh, my lady, I could not. After all, I am only a humble servant—"

But the countess stopped her with a gesture. "No, my dear, that is true in the social order but God sees us all as souls. Now take the dress, for I am in debt to you, who try so hard to make an old woman happy."

Mathilde came striding towards them, almost springing over the luxurious carpet. She looked sharply at the countess. "You are having one of your headaches. Is it not so, my lady?"

"Why yes, Mathilde."

"If you please, my lady." And before her mistress could offer objection, the old servitor reached over and with dexterous touch swiftly undid all the elaborate hairdressing of Mademoiselle Annette. "Now let me help you to bed, my lady. Close your eyes and think of the Poor Souls. Such Father Antoine told you was the best remedy for your head."

The countess was not surprised; such scenes had taken place before. Mathilde, despite her unprepossessing manner, was a woman of great character and force of expression. Relaxed on the great bed, the countess felt better. Thinking of the Poor Souls, Father Antoine's prescription, might help as in the past. As she slipped back, supported by the wiry strength of Mathilde's bony hands, she saw Annette weeping in the far corner of the room. Poor child, she does not understand Mathilde, but she will soon be gay again, walking with some fine young farmer and making him blush and stammer with her clever repartee.

Outside on the great velvety lawn with its border of hedge, neatly clipped, Margaret was running towards the

orchard. The wind blew her dark, soft hair in a stream and her lithe, childish form flitted across the green with the airy grace of a bird on the wing. Her catechism lesson with old Mathilde was finished and she had received a grudging word of praise. The little girl was happy, for today her parents were coming to Corcheval and bringing the baby, Jacques.

The orchard was a place of delight, the sun dappled the ground between the trees and there was the sweet odor of ripening fruit, the humming of bees among the branches. She slowed her first wild dash to a walk to enjoy the fragrant beauty of the scene. With the changeful mood of the very young she paused to gaze about her. A moving figure at the lower edge of the enclosure caught her eye, and with a scream of rapture she began running again, for it was impossible not to recognize Father Antoine in his shabby soutane. With her dear uncle was a white-haired priest, whose immaculate, well-groomed appearance was in complete contrast to that of his bucolic companion. He wore a clerical hat, and the wide sash around his middle accentuated his leanness. His face was smooth-shaven and he carried a handsomely-bound breviary.

"This is my little niece, Father. She stays here. And this is Father de Lacourtois, darling. He has just arrived from Paris. I am bringing him to see the Countess. How is your godmother today?"

"She was well at breakfast, Father," answered the little girl, bowing to the strange priest. "But she has many bad headaches."

"The Countess is far from well, Father de Lacourtois," explained the cure. "She suffers a great deal with her head. There is nothing she can do about it. A fine doctor from Paris told her there is no cure. It is an infirmity of her advancing years."

"Ah, yes, the infirmities of age," said Father de Lacour-

tois, a venerable and saintly Jesuit. "God has spared me in that matter."

Father Antoine burst out laughing. "You are as lean as a greyhound and as hard as the bark of an oak tree. My faith, I am out of breath from climbing the hill while you skip over the earth as lightly as Margaret."

The Jesuit patted the child's head with his delicate hand. She interested him, a beautiful child with her odd, piquant features, but it was her unusual expression that intrigued him. He could feel the soul behind the large eyes gazing with the unabashed innocence of childhood into his own rather weary ones. He had looked into the eyes of the great—kings, dukes, duchesses—but none had moved him as did the eyes of this child in an orchard in remote Burgundy.

"Where to, my child?" asked Father Antoine, plucking a ripe apple from a nearby tree and sticking it into his mouth, munching it with relish.

"I was going to play, Father, but I shall return with you to my godmother, if you wish."

"No, cherie, have your play. I'm stopping on the way to the chateau to show Father de Lacourtois our chapel."

"Oh, let me come too," cried Margaret.

"Of course, please yourself."

Margaret went skipping ahead. She loved the old, quiet chapel where she could, as she simply said, "talk with Jesus." Father de Lacourtois slowed his pace to the leisurely amble of the Cure of Verosvres who was discussing apples, the agricultural possibilities of this section, the great value of devotion to the Poor Souls and anything that popped into his imagination. Slowly they approached the ancient little house of God, nestling among the elms.

What a lovely place, thought the scholarly Jesuit, sighing briefly as he looked back on the years he had spent as confessor in the royal court. How blissful here in this quiet locality with the lovely face of nature at once so simple and

magnificent! And in Father Alacoque he found a relief from the studied conversation of diplomacy and intrigue.

"When one is young like my small niece," said the cure, "one is close to God. All young things have this blessed quality, puppies, calves, colts. They are still unspoiled. Then when one grows old, one again grows close to God. For this reason both are very interesting periods."

The visitor laughed gently. "As regards children you are eminently correct, mon pere, but it has been my experience that grey-haired scoundrels are the worst. Vice increases with age."

"Oh, well, I should have been more explicit but those old rascals are close to God's vengeance. Now this," he went on with characteristic abrupt change of subject, "is part of heaven. Look at the old castle, the lake, the red deer slipping behind that thicket. And the wonderful fruits and flowers and vegetables, the oats and golden wheat. See how the sun makes a green mist in the forest, falling through the thick leaves. Ah, if only I had all my dear ones here with the Blessed Trinity and the Virgin and St. Joseph, it would be heaven enough for me!"

As they turned to follow the little girl into the chapel, the clash of carriage wheels on the drive broke the quiet. "It's my brother, Claude, with his wife and two of the children," cried Father Antoine joyously. "Come, let's meet them."

They hurried across the green, and Father Antoine made the brief introductions. "And where is Margaret?" asked her mother.

"She just ran ahead of us into the chapel," answered the cure. "I was about to show it to Father de Lacourtois."

"I'll join the child there for a moment," said the Jesuit, "and tell her the good news of your arrival."

The chapel was cool and dim after the sunshine of outdoors, the twilight intensified by the great elms which en-

circled it. The light filtered with subdued radiance through narrow, stained-glass windows. Under the sanctuary lamp Margaret knelt before the tabernacle with folded hands, as still as the statues which seemed to look benignly down upon her from their shadowy recesses. Father de Lacourtois' footsteps echoed over the old stone floor, but the child took no notice of his presence, not even when he came and knelt beside her. Her eyes were fastened on the door of the tabernacle, and she was speaking in a sweet, low tone that was quite audible to him.

"O my God," she was saying, "I dedicate to You my purity and I make to You a vow of perpetual chastity."

The little girl's voice ceased. The chapel grew intensely still. Outside the leaves of the elm trees seemed to whisper softly together, birds called faintly in their branches.

Father de Lacourtois placed a gentle hand on the child's shoulder. "Your parents are waiting outside for you, but before we go, tell me, my little Margaret, do you know what the word 'vow' means?"

"Oh, no, Father," she responded quickly.

"And do you know what the word 'chastity' means?"

"No, Father, I don't know the meaning of that word either." Then as they walked towards the door, she told him that many, many times she said these words while kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament. "The first time I said them was one morning while I was hearing Mass. They came to me just after the priest held up the Host. Is it wrong, Father, for me to say them?"

"No, no, indeed, it is very good," Father de Lacourtois told her. "They are noble words and many of the Saints have said them."

"Then," cried Margaret, a triumphant note in her voice, "I will never, never say my night prayers with Ma'mselle Annette again. She says they are foolish words, and when I say them she laughs at me."

Outside the carriage stood waiting, and Margaret flew to her mother's arms. She hugged Chrysostom and kissed her baby brother. "Ride here, Father de Lacourtois," said Father Antoine, indicating the seat facing Madame Ala-coque. "Chrysostom, you sit beside Father and tell him about your stone altar and the big woolly dog I gave you. I shall ride on the driver's seat with Claude. We have many things to talk about."

It was only a short drive up the winding road to the chateau. "And now what's on your mind, brother?" laughed Claude, letting the horses trot slowly along.

"It's about Dr. Gavet's bill. The good man asked me to remind you of it. He says you owe him for seven years' service. You should pay him at once. Debt is a bad thing, a man in debt is never free."

Claude looked distressed. "But I can't pay him now. I'm low in funds and his bill is very large—"

"Then pay part of it," interrupted Father Antoine. "He has waited too long as it is, and the more you delay the harder it will be to settle. If you can't make a payment on this old debt, I wish you would let me do it."

"Oh, no, please don't think of such a thing," exclaimed Claude, his face flushing. "I'll collect some of the money that's owed me and settle the whole bill at once."

"And that's another thing," went on his brother, "why don't you get your aristocratic associates to pay what they owe? If you would collect your own accounts, they would be more than enough to settle all your debts and leave a big balance."

"Don't worry, Antoine," replied Claude. "I trust people and I expect them to trust me. They are sure of being paid."

"But you are too trusting," insisted the cure, who was of a practical turn. Claude was notoriously good-hearted and it was impossible to be angry with him; nevertheless Father

Antoine realized that Benoite and her husband had some grounds for their grievances against the Alacoques. Tous-saint would make Lhautecour prosperous if Claude would give him the means to work out his plans.

Claude was silent under his brother's criticism. The cure relentlessly continued the unpleasant topic. "Why don't you make Jules Mareaux, the merchant, pay up for settling his estate? He owes you a large fee for that—"

"But Mareaux has not yet been paid by the court," interrupted Claude, "and right now he is in a tight position for money."

"Indeed he is not!" exclaimed the cure. "Only a short while ago I was in Simone's goldsmith shop in Charolles, having a chalice regilded, when Mareaux came in and bought an expensive ring."

"Oh, probably it was something his wife wanted," said Claude.

"That does not look like poverty to me," stated the cure. "You should be more firm with him."

"Mareaux will pay as soon as his case is disposed of, which should be very soon."

Claude was thankful when they reached the chateau for such conversations always distressed him.

The countess left her bed as soon as Mathilde broke the news of the party's arrival. Her head was no longer aching. Again Father Antoine's formula of the Poor Souls had proven effective. For several hours she laughed and enjoyed the visitors. Margaret, delighted to be reunited with her mother and brothers, was in one of her gay moods. Father de Lacourtois could hardly believe this was the motionless little creature who had impressed him so deeply in the chapel.

At last the Alacoques departed amidst much gaiety, with Margaret and her godmother waving goodbyes from the broad entrance. The little girl, tired out from the long,

happy day, was carried off to the nursery by Mathilde. For the first time since their meeting, the countess and her priestly guest had an opportunity to speak of the matter which had prompted his visit to Corcheval.

"I am enroute to our provincial house at Lyons," explained the Jesuit as they seated themselves at a small table in the library. "But I have certain places to visit on my way. This chateau is one of them, for I have a very special confidential message for you. It concerns the welfare of our beloved land."

His words were spoken in serious tones and his face was grave. "I am deeply interested in anything you may say," replied the countess. "Though I live in this remote corner of Burgundy and am old and a woman you may rely upon my following your advice. I have always maintained that without the Church, society, no matter how brilliant or learned, is doomed."

"Well said," replied the priest. "I only wish others were so strong in faith. It has become quite common, though, for many to flout the Church and dismiss her warnings with a shrug of the shoulders. Also, certain ambitious politicians think it expedient to utilize the Church in their schemes. They excuse their actions by stating that their purpose is laudable and the ultimate good can only be achieved by such devious method."

Dusk was stealing down from the dark, frowning mountains; in the west the last faint glow of color was dying. Father de Lacourtois paused for a moment as if to concentrate his mind on the subject. A servant came in and lit some candles.

"As you know, Countess," the priest continued, "France is supposed to be under the rule of Anne of Austria until the young king comes of age. But Anne of Austria does not rule France. The mighty force behind the throne is Cardinal Mazarin."

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"But surely the Cardinal is a wise and clever man," replied the countess, "a good captain to steer the ship of state. I have been told that he is quite remarkable."

"He is more than that, Countess. He is a genius. Nature has endowed him with such charm that he can persuade the most obdurate. Beneath a calm and pliant bearing his will is indomitable and his mind moves like a rapier to accomplish his ends. It is known that the Holy Father has reason to fear him."

"You astonish me," exclaimed the countess.

"Yes, Cardinal Mazarin is a great figure and devotes his strength and intellect to the honor and glory of France. But he also makes alliances with the heretical nations. For him the State comes first. Basically this is wrong and, though France through his manipulations may become the center of European power and culture, yet some day, if religion takes second place, will come the deluge."

This prophecy, uttered in measured low tones, alarmed the countess for she realized that it was spoken by a person of distinction and rare ability, as well as a zealous son of the Church.

"I am warning the nobles," went on Father de Lacourtois, "those whom we trust, to watch carefully and judge seriously the schemes which may emanate from the throne. Sift well the news and remember that the Church can never, never be subservient to the State."

"Oh, if only I were younger," cried the countess, her fervor kindled by the disclosures of the vigilant Jesuit, "I would arouse the countryside. I would engage priests to preach the truth in every town. I would warn all of the danger to our beloved France."

"May God bless you," said the visitor as he took his leave.

"Thank you, Father," said the countess gratefully. "Please remember me in your prayers. It is no small duty

to manage these old feudal grants in the changing conditions through which we are passing. God has been very, very good to me. I have not many years left, but I have great plans for my little goddaughter."

"She is an exceptional child and comes from fine forebears," observed the Jesuit. "Here in Burgundy remain the very best of the old families. So long as France can produce such a generation, one need not fear the future."

Father de Lacourtois was thinking of the unusual scene in the chapel and the strange vow he had overheard. Perhaps the obvious explanation was that Margaret had heard the words in some pious story and, liking the sound, had retained them in her memory with the unconscious aptitude of childhood. Yet the inflection of her voice, the emotion and determination expressed, seemed to disprove that assumption. What could it mean? The priest was convinced that the six-year-old child's vow of perpetual chastity rose from some wellspring of the soul as yet veiled from the undeveloped mind. He was a deeply religious man and he would never forget the impression made by the little girl kneeling before the Divine Presence in the empty chapel of Corcheval.

This same intuitive faculty caused her aversion to Annette, for that young woman was far from the artless creature her mistress believed her to be. Only a few weeks later Annette's real character was revealed when she suddenly left Corcheval, wearing the ring which Monsieur Mareaux had purchased in Charolles. She had gone to Paris, and gone with her was the infatuated merchant, who had deserted his wife and children. Unscrupulous and designing, she was clever enough to fool the countess, a woman of the world; yet a child had seen through her. It was more than odd for Margaret to possess such rare discernment.

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III

Margaret was coming home. She sat by her father, who was driving the restless young team. Claude Alacoque was heavily dressed, his fur cap pulled down over his ears and a great silk muffler wound around his throat. Margaret likewise was warmly clad. Both father and daughter were silent and sad. The wind sweeping down from the mountain heights was desperately cold. Claude coughed; he had contracted a cold in these last few days. The horses were hard to restrain. Their perfect health, high spirits and the icy

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weather, made them eager to run. Their eyes sparkled and they shied away from every old log along the road.

The man and the little girl continued their journey toward Lhautecour. Tears welled up in the child's eyes and she dabbed at them with her handkerchief. It began to snow, the white flakes whirling down in flurries from the lonesome skies. Both were thinking the same thought as they proceeded through the rugged country. Up there in the old, old cemetery of the De Fautrieres, the countess' tomb would soon be covered by the silent snow.

The end had come with sudden and dramatic poignancy. For years the noblewoman had been the painful victim of severe headaches; as time passed these attacks increased in number and severity but because they were chronic, the household had grown accustomed to them. After they were over the countess would take her walks, attend to affairs of the estate or drive in the park. Occasionally a physician would come over from Charolles, prescribe some medicine or draw some blood from his patient.

The morning of the day she died, the countess had a slight headache but she recovered by noon and ate a light lunch. Then she took a walk with Margaret. She was particularly affectionate to her little goddaughter, who sang and skipped while the countess stepped slowly over the soft turf. The glorious, bright hues of autumn were fading.

"My child, I shall do great things for you," said the countess. "You are now only eight years old but years go swiftly and I must attend to your future."

Margaret paid scant heed, for she was entranced by the scene around her; she was part of the sun and the earth, the elms and the late blooming flowers. A child takes no thought of the future, and Margaret was content at Corcheval. The great halls, the polished floors, the enormous furniture, the silver dishes and old tapestries were all familiar to her. And best of all, the chapel with its stone flags, cold

in winter and warm in summer. The present held her, the future she could not visualize.

Night prayers were over and Margaret in her snowy bed heard cries and sobbing. What had happened? Old Mathilde had gone in for a last look at her mistress—it was indeed the last look, for she lay at the foot of her small shrine, her rosary clasped in her hand. Margaret, Countess of Corcheval, had gone to join the long line of her illustrious ancestors.

The days that followed were like a harrowing nightmare for the child. Even now it was hard to believe that her dear godmother was gone. She leaned her head against her father's shoulder and he smiled down at her. "She is too young to realize what death means," thought Claude. "Once she is back home she will quickly recover." Aloud he said. "Remember, darling, what Father Antoine told you. Your godmother has gone to a lovelier place than Corcheval. She is very happy there and would not want you to grieve for her. You will feel better when you see Mama and your brothers."

He noticed how she brightened at his words. Lhautecour would be a complete change of scene for her and her mind would be filled with family life. Her childish grief would pass. They whirled through the gates and into the courtyard in a blinding snow flurry. The three older boys were waiting for them and rushed to meet them. Jean, now a tall youth of fifteen, swung his little sister to the ground and Philibert, who looked enough like him to pass for his twin, carried her bodily into the house. Chrysostom, her old playmate, pulled off her mittens and began rubbing her frozen hands. Baby Jacques, the four-year-old, screamed with delight and flung his chubby arms around her. There was a great deal of excitement and laughter and then Margaret was clasped in her mother's arms.

Tossing aside his greatcoat, Claude greeted his wife

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warmly and sank into a chair beside the log fire. Ah, it was good to be home with one's family! "I'm a lucky man," he thought. "If only I could throw off this miserable cold." He was tired, very tired and, even here by the blazing hearth, shaking with chills. The glass of wine he sipped did not alleviate his distress. His body shook with painful coughing, his head was throbbing painfully.

"Claude, you are quite ill," said Philiberte anxiously, placing her hand on his burning forehead. "Let me send for Dr. Gavet—"

"No, no," protested her husband. "It's just a heavy cold. I'll be better after I've had a good night's rest." He would have liked to remain with his family but he must lie down, for he was too sick to sit up any longer. It was a strange sensation, his body torn with pain and his mind so serene.

In the morning Claude's cold was no better but he insisted on getting up. There was much to be done about the countess' affairs, and only he could attend to the task properly. Benoite annoyed him by continuously asking questions about Margaret's future. Why had not her godmother bequeathed the child a handsome patrimony? What about all the talk of making Margaret a great lady some day? Claude patiently explained over and over that no written provision had been made by the countess for her god-daughter, that whatever plans the good lady might have had, existed only in her head at the time of her sudden death.

His explanations irritated his sister but failed to halt the stream of her interminable questions. To escape them Claude locked himself in his office and plunged into his work. On the desk by his elbow reposed a huge honeycomb which Father Antoine had sent him to cure his cold. The boys had brought it home from school. All except the youngest went to the presbytery now to attend the classes their uncle conducted for the sons of such well-to-do citi-

zens as wished to provide them with the rudiments of learning.

One morning Claude's cough seemed better. The snow had ceased and the grey clouds dissolved. The bright sun was melting the white covering into scintillating droplets. Claude sat at his desk, where the last of the legal documents concerning Corcheval were completed and piled neatly together. He leaned back and ran his eyes over them with satisfaction, glad that the task was over.

The sunshine cast a cheerful pattern on the floor, a few beams concentrated on the honeycomb, making it glow like an amber liquid. Claude smiled as he tasted a small piece. Suddenly he felt a sharp stabbing pain in his right side. For a moment he thought he would suffocate, but the sensation passed.

"I feel much better," he told Philiberte. "I shall drive over to Terreau. It's such a short way and I have some cases coming up there today."

His wife looked anxiously at him. "Are you sure you are well enough to go out?"

Before he could answer the stabbing pain came again, this time in the region of his heart. A paroxysm of coughing seized him and the handkerchief which he pressed to his mouth came away stained crimson.

Philiberte's face paled when she caught sight of the blood-stained handkerchief and her hand trembled as she poured a glass of sherry. "Drink this, my dear. You are unable to go out. Come, I'll help you to bed and send for the doctor—"

"Nonsense," interrupted Claude with a laugh. "There is nothing to be alarmed about. I feel quite well again after drinking this wine."

He made light of her worries and insisted upon leaving for Terreau, the manor that was located nearest Lhautecour on the opposite side of Verosvres. But when he said good-

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bye he kissed her with more than usual tenderness and held her face for a moment between his hands. "You are a good wife, my sweet Philiberte, a good mother."

She never forgot those words, for they were the last her husband spoke to her. That afternoon Jean hurried home, breathless and terrified, with the news that his father had collapsed on the bench and had been taken to his brother's home in Verosvres. Father Antoine had put him to bed at once and sent for Dr. Gavet. But he did not wait for the medical man's diagnosis before administering the final rites of the Church, for his priestly experience warned him that his brother was a very sick man—sicker than he had ever known him to be in all their lives.

Dr. Gavet was shocked by the magistrate's condition. "Why was I not sent for sooner?" he asked. "This man is suffering from lung fever. Do not attempt to move him to his home—that would be fatal." He prescribed drugs and treatment, then left, stating that he would be back that night.

"I must send for Philiberte at once." decided Father Antoine, his heart heavy with apprehension as he looked at his brother's unconscious face. "Dear God, what will become of her and the children if Claude should—"

He did not finish the thought, but he knew that his brother was sinking fast. Claude had fallen into a stupor shortly after receiving the final absolution and had not roused since. Nor did he rouse again. For days the Master of Lhautecour had been a victim of neglected pneumonia, and now the overworked heart, like a clock run down, ceased to beat. . . .

Philiberte Alacoque's world crashed with the death of her husband. Only after he had been so unpredictably taken from this life at the age of forty-one did she begin to realize her utter dependence upon him. Yet Claude, who had so devotedly waited upon his wife and had spared no

effort to brighten her days, had singularly left her in this helpless condition. He had never discussed money matters with her and, indeed, Philiberte was never one to interest herself in her husband's finances. They had always lived well; he was indulgent to his family. His judicial position, the high standing he enjoyed in his profession, brought substantial monetary returns, but Claude had scarcely been laid to rest when an avalanche of unpaid bills began pouring down upon his widow's incompetent and sorrowing head. Some of them were ten years old, like Dr. Gavet's, the family physician. Staggering as they were, Philiberte would not have been so completely overwhelmed if her husband had left the means to pay his creditors. But there was not enough to make even partial settlements, although the amounts owed the departed magistrate were far greater. Always a notoriously poor collector, Claude was a man who could neither pay nor get paid.

"Ah, how many times I warned and begged him to change his ways," Father Antoine told Philiberte, his eyes filling with tears as he recalled the wasteful yet happy past. "But he only laughed at me and postponed the evil day."

And now that time of reckoning had come for Claude Alacoque's wife and children. The first shock of grief was not over when a much harsher awakening befell them. Philiberte's soft, gentle nature was so bowed down with sorrow she did not realize the frightening condition she faced at Lhautecour.

She was kneeling before a statuette of the Virgin in her bedroom, saying her rosary for Claude's soul, when a loud knock sounded on the door. Without waiting for her to answer, Jeanette flung it open and announced that Monsieur Delaroche wished to speak with her.

"Tell him I shall see him in the office in a few moments," said Philiberte.

"Monsieur Delaroche is already waiting for you there,"

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answered the old servant. Her face was impassive, but there was a mocking glint in her small, cold eyes.

This was a surprise, but a greater one awaited Philiberte when she found that Toussaint had taken possession of her husband's desk and was sitting in Claude's big chair. Her sisters-in-law were seated nearby.

"Sit down," he said abruptly, without rising or offering her a chair. "You know why we are here." He paused, swallowing visibly, seemed on the point of saying something more, then changed his mind.

Philiberte sat down facing him and looked from one to the other with a surprised air. Catherine, who had been kinder than usual to her since her brother's death, stared back at her with the old hostility. Benoit was frankly impatient of her husband's halting manner.

"We—I sent for you to talk about the estate," went on Toussaint. "It's in a bad fix—very bad. Everything has been run down for years."

Again Toussaint floundered for words. The habit of looking up to Claude's wife as his superior was too strong to be lightly discarded, even though he agreed with Benoit that she was a foolish, wasteful creature.

"Why don't you come to the point, Toussaint?" demanded Benoit suddenly, for she could no longer restrain her impatience. "Tell her!"

Her husband's face turned red and he looked embarrassed but his large round eyes did not falter as he fixed them gravely on Philiberte. He blurted out the declaration which had been prearranged between himself and Claude's sisters. "The property has come into my possession. I am taking over Lhautecour right away."

"And I am the mistress of Lhautecour from now on," spoke up Benoit. "I shall take charge of the household. Today begins a new order: work, save, prosper." Catherine regarded her sister with an admiring nod of the head.

"Behold This Heart"

"But what of Claude's children?" cried Philiberte. "Is not Jean the eldest son, the rightful owner of the estate?"

Toussaint smiled faintly at her ignorance of legal matters. "Jean is only fifteen," he explained. "All your children are minors."

"And as such," finished Benoite triumphantly, "my husband becomes their legal guardian. They will be completely under our charge."

"Until the oldest son comes of age," amended Toussaint. "And in the meanwhile, Madame Alacoque, we must all work together to restore the estate. There is much to be done." He gazed out the windows at the neglected barns and the fallow land beyond. "I have worked hard all these years but I could never get the things I needed for the farm—"

"And in the house it is much worse," interrupted Benoite, "a crowd of worthless, lazy servants, eating their heads off, carrying away food and anything else they can lay their hands on, draining the place dry. I am going to send more than half of them packing."

"Several of the men servants must go, too," said Toussaint.

"And there will be no more fancy foods and fine clothes," went on Catherine, with a vindictive look at Philiberte. "Our poor brother was a great provider for you and your children but very poor for this place. All will now be on an equal footing here."

"An equal footing," repeated Toussaint approvingly. "That will be fair to all. Jean and Philibert are big lads now, well able to help with the farm work—"

"No, no," cried Philiberte, rousing suddenly from her stunned bewilderment. "You must not turn Claude's children into farmers. They must be reared in a manner befitting their station."

Toussaint regarded her with surprise and animosity.

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"Farming will be their station," he stated. "A good, honest life."

The thought of her children condemned to an inferior state to which they were entirely unsuited aroused Philiberte to rebellion. "For myself I do not care," she said, her voice trembling, "but I am the children's mother, even though you are their guardian, and I owe them an education."

"There is no money to send your sons off to school," retorted Benoit. "Not a single sou. Don't you understand?"

"Then I shall make the money myself," answered Philiberte surprisingly.

"You make money," sneered Catherine. "What could a helpless person like you do?"

"If I was helpless, it was because Claude was here," Philiberte replied, a new dignity in her manner. "Now he is gone and I must do my duty by his children. Father Antoine assured me that a great many clients owed Claude for his services. I can collect these sums—"

"Did Father Antoine mention all the debts that are owed?" interrupted Benoit scornfully.

"He did, and I intend to pay all of them," answered Philiberte. "But there will still be a large amount left over."

"And you will squander it," accused Catherine, "just as you squandered when Claude was alive. Instead, it should be put to good use here on the estate."

Toussaint intervened. "No, Catherine, that would not be just. These accounts are all personal. The money is owed for legal services. The estate has no share in them, any more than it is responsible for your brother's personal debts. These are matters to be settled by his widow and, if she can collect the money, it is hers to dispose of."

Philiberte rose, terminating the discussion. "Give me a little time. I shall start at once."

"Wait, Philiberte," said Benoit with a sarcastic grimace.

"There are a few small details that seem to have escaped your notice. First, there is the matter of the household keys. I shall thank you to turn them over to me at once."

"Oh, of course," answered her sister-in-law. "Felice has charge of them. She is the housekeeper and—"

"She is not the housekeeper any more," interrupted Benoite abruptly. "I'll take charge of my own household and run things myself. Felice can step down and take her place with the other servants."

"I shall see that she turns the keys over to you, Benoite," said Philiberte, quietly reproachful.

"And there is another point you have overlooked," went on Benoite in the same ironical vein. "While you are out collecting Claude's accounts all over the countryside, who is going to look after your five children? Surely you cannot expect us to do that?"

Philiberte pressed her long, delicate fingers to her throbbing temples. "I asked for a little time," she said, "but I see now that was expecting too much. My children will not trouble you, for I fully expect to collect enough money to-day to pay the initial expenses of the two older boys. The little ones can remain with me for the time being."

She spoke with a brave show of confidence but she was trembling violently, for the unexpected scene with her dead husband's sisters and brother-in-law left her completely unnerved. The old feeling of helplessness was coming back and there was a lump in her throat, but she did not give way to her feelings. She must appear calm for the sake of Margaret and little Jacques, who must not be frightened by the sight of their mother in tears. The three older boys were with their uncle, Father Antoine, having resumed their studies that very morning. She put on her mantle and bonnet with its long crepe veil, symbol of widowhood, and rang for Felice.

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"Take care of the children until I return, Felice," she said. "I am going over to Verosvres in the carriage but I shall be back as quickly as possible." And then, in as few words as she could, Philiberte told the housekeeper of the changed order at Lhautecour.

The faithful soul, who had been with the Alacoques from the time that Claude had brought his young bride to Lhautecour, was not greatly surprised. "It is just what I feared would happen," she said with an ominous shake of the head. "I know these people better than you do and if it were not presuming on my part, I would have warned you—"

Philiberte seized Felice's large competent hand in her delicate clasp. "Dear Felice," she said warmly. "We are old friends and I need your advice desperately. Please tell me what you would do in my place."

"You are a kind, sweet lady," returned Felice, "the best mistress a body could have and I can't bear to see you imposed upon. If I were in your place I would tell Father Antoine just exactly what his precious pair of sisters are up to and have him give them a good talking to. He'll make them behave themselves."

But Philiberte shook her head. "They are his sisters, Felice, and blood is thicker than water. Father Antoine has always been my friend and I know how he loved Claude but I could not expect him to interfere in Benoit's and Catherine's affairs. Besides, even if he did take my part against them I doubt if it would do much good, since they are quite sure that they are absolutely right in everything they do. I know they have never approved of me."

"Yes, yes," agreed the housekeeper. "What you say is very true. It would do no good."

"No matter how they treat me," said Philiberte, "I shall never say one word to their brother against them. And

isn't he my brother, too? Where could I find a truer? He is a very sensible, practical man as well as a good father. I am going to consult him before I take any step."

This was the wisest move Claude's widow could make, for Father Antoine was deeply concerned over the welfare of his brother's family and, even if Philiberte had consented, would never have sanctioned Toussaint's plans for their future. "Claude's sons will have an education equal to his own," he assured Philiberte. "I intend to assume the full responsibility for their schooling."

"How can I ever thank you, dear Father Antoine," began Philiberte but the cure dismissed her grateful outburst with a wave of his hand. "I am glad to do all I can for the children. You know how dearly I love every one of them. The two older boys are ready to go away to school and only a short while ago Claude discussed this very matter with me," he said.

"Did he mention any special place?" asked Philiberte quickly, for she was eager to fulfil every wish of her beloved husband.

Father Antoine nodded. "We decided upon the abbey school of Cluny," he replied. "It was there that both Claude and I studied and it is, as you know, the best in these parts."

The renowned Benedictine motherhouse, founded in the Tenth century, was second only to Rome as a center of Christian culture during the Middle Ages and the abbey church, largest in Christendom until the erection of St. Peter's, was one of the wonders of the medieval world. During the sixteenth century the Huguenots had sacked it and later it was almost entirely destroyed by the Revolutionists but at this period the Abbey of Cluny was one of the great seats of learning. It was situated several miles beyond Macon.

Philiberte agreed with the cure that Cluny would be

The Old Order Changes

the best place for her two eldest. "They will not be too homesick, since they will be together."

"And Chrysostom and Jacques can stay right here with me," went on their uncle. "They will be comfortable and quite at home."

"That will be a good arrangement," assented their mother. "I wish that I could keep the youngest with me but I am afraid it would be difficult while I am traveling about."

"It would never do, Philiberte," interrupted the cure. "He will be safe with me and you can see both of the little fellows often. They can spend Sundays at home, if you like."

"You make all my problems seem so much easier," said Philiberte, her eyes shining with gratitude. "When I came here my heart was like a heavy stone. Now everything looks different. Do you think it will be possible for me to keep Margaret with me? I hope that it will be."

Father Antoine was silent a moment but his face wore a dubious look. "I know how you feel about parting with your little daughter, especially after giving her up before," he said gently, "but for her own sake, it will be much better to send Margaret to the Urbanist Sisters at Charolles, where she will receive an education and training."

And so the arrangements for Claude's children were completed and his widow given the opportunity to collect his accounts. After she left, Father Antoine shook his head. "Poor thing, she does not realize what she is attempting," he sighed. "Philiberte is the last person in the world to tackle such a job. What little money she does get will be swallowed up by debts."

Time proved the cure's prediction to be eminently correct.

Charolles

IV

"*She is like a monkey,*" laughed Elise. "No height is too high, no distance so wide, she cannot climb or jump it."

"Oh, she frightens me," quavered Amelie. "I wish Margaret would not do the things she does."

A clump of girls stood in a corner of the convent school-yard, looking, some with admiration, some with awe, as Margaret Alacoque directed the girls to tighten the clothes line. There was a vivacious smile on her eager little face. Margaret was going to attempt walking the rope from one end to the other, with the aid of a stick. Never had the girls known such a daring character.

"I think we should call Sister Josephine," continued

Amelie, a gentle child with a kind face. "Margaret is so frail, I'm afraid she'll get hurt."

"Oh no, never fear," broke in Constance Millet, the daughter of the local banker. "Margaret may be frail but she has the strength of wire, and such energy."

Meanwhile Margaret swung up on the rope. It swayed dizzily but with the aid of the stick she maintained her balance. Everybody was crowding around her now, offering advice and some of the more daring cheering her on. Since coming to the school Margaret had been the ring-leader in all their games. Everybody loved the little gamin, even though at times her actions verged on the boisterous.

Half way across, the slender figure wavered, one foot missed the rope. There was a gasp from the watchers but suddenly Margaret found footing. The rope swung crazily but she regained her equilibrium and plunged rapidly forward. On her face was concentration mixed with a reckless gaiety. She enjoyed the groans as well as the plaudits of her comrades.

In the midst of the excitement Sister Josephine arrived, unnoticed. A look of horror crossed her good-natured face and her impulse was to call out a warning but common sense told her that even a slight distraction might break the rope-walker's control and result in a fall and possible injury. So Sister Josephine said nothing, but with strained nerves followed Margaret's successful progress to the end of the journey. A wild burst of applause greeted the conclusion of the exploit.

Sister Josephine hurried to the center. "Margaret, what have you been doing?"

"Having some fun, Sister," said the girl, a mischievous expression lighting her animated features.

"Fun!" cried the nun, aghast. "Suppose you fell? You might break your neck."

"But I've climbed big rocks at home, oh, away up high.

"Behold This Heart"

I used to have one special rock that I could see the cross of the church from."

"You must never, never walk that rope again," replied the nun firmly. "You may be able to, but others will try and we may have a house full of cripples to take care of."

The banker's daughter glanced at Elise with an artful smile. "Somebody must be the first to do something daring," she whispered, "and we French are daring." Constance liked to read history, French history best of all. She was a talented girl and employed her opportunities in her own somewhat wilful way. She was attracted to this little country girl, Margaret, with her gaiety and vivacity, her unique background of life in a great chateau, of being the only girl in a family of four brothers. It was well known that Margaret had never played with girls in her life until she came to the convent, a distinction that made her the envy of her school mates but the object of special surveillance on the part of her teachers.

"Besides, such antics are most unladylike," continued Sister Josephine. "The good God has made you a girl, Margaret Alacoque, and when you comport yourself like a wild tomboy, you are displeasing to Him."

"But I did not know that," cried Margaret in consternation. "I'll never, never walk a tight-rope again, if God does not want me to. Oh, Sister, I'm sorry. Is God very angry with me?"

Sister Josephine was surprised by the remarkable effects her lecture produced. Why, the Alacoque child had actually turned pale at the thought of displeasing God. What a remarkable little creature! The good nun was secretly concerned and her voice was no longer disapproving as she said: "God is not angry with you this time, chérie, since you knew no better. But don't let it happen again."

"I promise, Sister," answered Margaret fervently. "Please, Sister, may I go to the chapel for a moment? I want to

tell Jesus how much I love Him and want to please Him."

The other girls stared after the small form, darting away to the chapel and looked at each other with puzzled expressions. "You never know what she will do next," said Elise. "She goes from the ridiculous to the sublime as quick as a wink."

"Do you know what I think, girls?" inquired Amelie with the air of one announcing a great discovery. "I think Margaret will be a nun. She loves to pray and go to the chapel and she adores convent life."

"That's true," agreed Elise, nodding her small head vigorously up and down. "The other day some of us were talking about what an awful life the nuns led, how they slept on boards and never ate meat, and that crazy Margaret said she thought it was all wonderful."

Constance squealed in derisive merriment. "It's you who are crazy, if you think that. Margaret Alacoque will be a famous woman, maybe an actress or a noblewoman. She is a born leader. You will hear of her when you grow up and you will be proud to exclaim: 'I went to school with Margaret Alacoque.'"

The girls broke into laughter, for Constance was prone to exaggeration and there was no telling where her imagination might lead her. However, there was no doubt that Margaret was a vigorous spirit and her amazing individuality deeply impressed her schoolmates. Such a marked personality could not escape the notice of the nuns. None of their students, not even the exceptional Constance, so challenged the interest. Her nature combined characteristics that were startlingly at variance; this child, so incessantly active, so bubbling over with high spirited animation, could become instantly a contemplative. In all the school there was no pupil so devoted to the Blessed Sacrament. Her adoration of the Holy Eucharist was intense and passionate.

One day Sister Josephine approached the abbess with a

request that Margaret be allowed to receive her First Communion, even though she was only nine and the established age was twelve. For weeks Margaret's teacher had had this idea on her mind and had talked it over with the other nuns who were in close contact with the child. All were agreed that Margaret gave promise of extraordinary spirituality.

The abbess laid aside her office book and smiled at Sister Josephine. "I suppose, Sister, that you consider this request most unusual but I believe it is quite reasonable. I've noticed our little Margaret's remarkable devotion, and I have already broached the subject to Father Pierre."

Sister Josephine's face lit up. "And what did he say, Mother?"

"He assured me that it was only proper to ask permission for Margaret to make her First Communion without further delay. Oh, how the good Jesus must love such a devoted child!"

"She is happiest when she is kneeling before the tabernacle," said her teacher. "I know how dearly she loves the convent but with her temperament I am afraid she would never be able to restrain herself—"

The abbess gently waved aside Sister Josephine's fears. "She is only a child, too young to decide her vocation, but remember our own St. Francis. He was called God's juggler. People thought him unseemly and could not understand how such an undignified figure attracted such widespread attention. Yet St. Francis brought about a spiritual revival. He had the great dignity of simplicity."

Sister Josephine was quite happy when she left the abbess. Margaret Alacoque was a favorite of hers even though she frequently had to curb the child's exuberance. Her strange combination of exterior gaiety and profound solemnity before the Blessed Sacrament was an endless puzzle to the good nun. The best and only logical explanation was that this odd little girl had wonderful faith—and faith like that

should be rewarded by letting Margaret receive Holy Communion. This was Sister Josephine's fond hope.

Father Pierre, the chaplain, was quite confident that the Bishop would grant permission, and in due time the letter arrived. He broke the large red seal on the envelope bearing the episcopal insignia. He paused to glance into the school-yard where a little group of girls, who had been screaming at the top of their lungs, suddenly became quiet. He watched the sister in charge selecting one from the group. He smiled, for it was Margaret Alacoque and he was certain the little culprit was in for a scolding.

Opening the letter, he read the good news with satisfaction; the Bishop of Autun had graciously granted the desired permission, even added to the official language a little postscript expressing his pleasure that the Urbanist Convent at Charolles had such a pious child within its walls.

Outside the sun was brilliant this morning, the doves cooed in the eaves of the old gabled building, the cries of the buyers and sellers in the narrow streets made an agreeable babble. It seemed a matter of rather small moment in the great, busy world; worldings would sneer scornfully at this trifling affair. Yet Father Pierre was impressed and deeply so. He loved the children, took a keen interest in all their juvenile problems and of the many who had attended the academy during his chaplaincy this mercurial little Alacoque was the most individualistic he had ever known. Never had the nuns a more interesting pupil, never had they exhibited so much concern over one of their little charges. Here in the small orbit of the enclosure, this girl had affected all her associates with her rare personality. And Father Pierre felt that whatever the future held for Margaret, she would always exert a strong influence in any sphere of life. Something in the depths of her soul glowed like a living flame which her apparent contradictions only served to vivify.

"Behold This Heart"

And so on the feast of Corpus Christi in the year 1656 Margaret made her First Holy Communion in the convent chapel, receiving the Body and Blood of her Divine Saviour from the hands of the chaplain. Except for the earnest priest, the adoring nuns and her schoolmates, none witnessed the simple ceremony. They were all familiar, more or less, with this little girl's great love for the Blessed Sacrament, for they had seen her kneel before the tabernacle in an ecstasy of devotion while time passed unnoticed and some had even surprised her lying prostrate on the floor in the Divine Presence. And now the supreme moment when Jesus would come into her heart had arrived. How would she respond? Would holy emotion prompt her to do something extraordinary?

Most aroused was Sister Josephine. Perhaps something miraculous might happen. Would Jesus appear in the Host? She had heard of such manifestations and it would be the most marvelous event, if such would take place here in their convent. With beating heart she watched the Host in the priest's hand. Perhaps now for a second she might see the Adorable Face. Oh, gladly would she die to be present at such a miraculous spectacle! But nothing happened. The Host remained white and immaculate. Margaret bowed her head and walked back to her pew with downcast eyes. There was no difference in her attitude than in any other communicant's.

Several days passed before the great change in her favorite pupil was noticed by Sister Josephine. The children had observed the difference in their schoolmate, but as yet none had mentioned it to the nun. She was sitting at the edge of the playground when an angry exclamation caught her attention. It was Constance Millet and she was speaking harshly to Margaret. Several other girls joined their protestations to hers.

"What's the matter with you, Margaret?" inquired Con-

stance shrilly. "You started the game and now you want to quit. You can't do that."

"But I don't want to play any more," answered Margaret, breaking away from the little circle.

"And why don't you want to play, my fine lady?" demanded Constance. "Are you trying to be smart?"

"Oh, please let me alone," cried Margaret. "I showed you how to play the game—"

"Come on, then, and finish it," said Elise, trying to pull her back into the game.

"It's no fun without you, Margaret," coaxed Amelie, taking her arm. "I thought you wanted to play—"

"I did, I did," protested Margaret almost in tears. "But now I—"

"You want to play but you don't want to play," interrupted Constance, tossing her head. "I used to think you were clever and different but now I know you are just cracked."

"That will be enough, Constance Millet," said Sister Josephine severely, having just arrived to calm the disturbance. "Girls, let Margaret alone. Perhaps she is not well. You must learn to be considerate of other people's feelings."

"Fiddlesticks," muttered Constance under her breath.

"Now Margaret," began Sister Josephine, turning about, "you—"

But Margaret was running from the yard like a young deer and it was too late to recall her. "Shall I go after her and bring her back, Sister?" asked Amelie.

"Better leave her alone for the present," advised the nun. "The poor child's feelings are hurt—"

"Oh, it's not that, Sister," said Amelie. "It's much worse."

"What do you mean?" asked Sister Josephine sharply. "Is Margaret really ill?"

"No, Sister. I don't know what's the matter with her but she's been acting very queer lately."

"Queer?" repeated the nun. "Tell me what makes you think that?"

"Well, several times Margaret has stopped playing in the middle of a game just like she did today and run away by herself. One day I followed her and looked all over for her. I could not find her any place and then I came across her hiding in a dark closet. I think she had been crying, Sister. Another time I found her in the chapel."

This incident, one of many similar happenings, made a deep impression on kind-hearted Sister Josephine. At first she could not fathom the significance of the girl's odd behavior, but when the Alacoque child continued to suddenly break off in the midst of some exciting game and run either to a secluded spot or the chapel, Sister Josephine decided that something serious was taking place and that the cause and remedy for this mysterious conduct should be discovered. She communicated her problem to the other sisters, some of whom had already noticed the change in Margaret.

"It's a sickness," said Sister Clare, the infirmarian, a very practical person. "That child is too high strung and her nerves have broken down. She needs quiet and rest."

Sister Josephine shook her head. "I cannot help thinking that the real reason behind Margaret's changed behavior goes back to her First Communion. It seems to me that the child is torn between two great desires, one her natural love of play with her companions, the other, the tabernacle."

Several of the nuns agreed with this explanation. Others glanced at the vigorous Sister Clare for a rebuttal, which came instantly. "But Holy Communion should bring happiness! Our blessed founder, St. Francis, who saw God in everything, was always the soul of good cheer and good fellowship. One never reads that he ran away from his fellowman."

Sister Josephine was silent a moment. She could not criticize St. Francis for whom, as a loyal Urbanist, she had

only the deepest admiration. Besides she abhorred arguments and her main concern was helping her little charge. "What you say is very true, Sister Clare," she said. "But why should a child like Margaret suddenly have a nervous breakdown? Everyone knows she was the most lively, the most daring pupil in the whole school."

Sister Josephine's adherents brightened at this practical question. How would Sister Clare answer it? The infirmarian smiled knowingly. "The very fact that she was so noisy, even to the point of causing numerous commotions in class and on the playground, indicates that her excessive vitality was the product of nerve tension. What has happened is very simple. You stretch and stretch a spring and then, one day, it breaks. That accounts for this sudden change in the Alacoque child. Receiving Communion is merely coincidental. She needs the services of a skilled doctor. That's the sensible course."

Now it was the turn for Sister Clare's followers to smile agreement. Her arguments were unanswerable. Still Sister Josephine was not convinced, although she gladly assented to the general opinion that the abbess should be consulted. "The doctor and the abbess will soon discover what is wrong with Margaret Alacoque," said Sister Clare confidently.

The abbess received the information regarding the little girl without undue alarm and immediately summoned the convent physician. After an examination, he assured her that Margaret had no particular disease of mind or body. He detected a certain nervousness for which he prescribed a tonic. There was nothing at all serious in the child's symptoms, he stated, and she should be perfectly normal again before long.

The abbess sent for Sister Josephine to tell her the medical opinion. "You will be glad, Sister," she said, "to hear that your pupil's health is quite satisfactory. One cannot

always tell about children. Sometimes they act in ways that adults cannot quite understand. I believe it is a mistake to worry too much in some cases. Dr. Carrel assures me that Margaret will soon be her old romping self again."

But Margaret did not improve. The strange aloofness which prompted this once happy girl to flee from her companions was only the forerunner of a mysterious affliction which neither Dr. Carrel's nostrums nor Sister Clare's common sense could alleviate. Gradually her appetite diminished until she was barely able to eat the smallest amounts of food. Fainting spells occurred with alarming frequency. Always slender, she became skin and bone. Her only rest seemed to be in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament.

The abbess was alarmed and consulted another physician, a man of special skill and discernment. Surely they must find the secret malady that was so swiftly reducing this child to a state of emaciation. Long and carefully he examined and questioned the patient, who presented a challenge to his medical career. In the end he admitted that he was completely baffled by this strange case. Certainly the little sufferer was not a mental patient, for she answered his questions clearly and coherently. As for the poor, wasted body, he could find no particular disease except certain symptoms of rheumatic fever but this was not sufficient cause for her condition.

"It could be a very rare rheumatic case, reverend mother, but I only say that as a sort of excuse for ignorance," he told the abbess candidly. "Possibly some drastic change in circumstances might have brought about certain physical reactions—I understand that she lost her father and her god-mother, who was very close to her, within a short interval. Or it might be differences of climate or food or environment. These are all possibilities, although they seem far-fetched. We must be patient and try various remedies, watch the diet, keep the patient cheerful. We must arrest

further progress of the condition but our methods can only be those of trial."

Margaret was put to bed in the infirmary, for her condition was such now that she was unable to remain in the dormitory or attend classes. Sister Clare bustled about with brisk determination, preparing diets, administering medicines and watching alertly for the recovery she so confidently anticipated. But there was no change for the better, only a definite progression of the baffling disorder that was sapping Margaret's life away. Whatever the cause, she was growing weaker and more wasted each day. Continuous pains tormented her night and day, making natural sleep impossible. The weeks passed into months and now Margaret was bedridden, unable to stand or scarcely sit up in bed without assistance.

Sister Josephine shed tears in secret over her poor lamb. She was convinced that all the medical care in the world could not cure Margaret. And in this she was correct, just as she had been when she ascribed the child's altered behavior to the effect of making her Communion. From that moment Margaret experienced a strange, unearthly feeling that gave her no rest. It was this that drew her away from her companions in the midst of the games that used to delight her so much but now seemed curiously dull. It led her into secluded places, where she could not be seen and urged her to fall on her knees and begin to pray. When someone found her, it was torture to her. She became a battleground between this compelling desire of the soul to be united with God and the physical craving for action, the love of pleasure inherent in her make-up. She was too young, of course, to realize what she was experiencing or to grasp the reason for this inner turmoil. She only felt that her little heart—so warm and eager for life, so filled with love for her Eucharistic Lord—was heavy with nameless sorrow and yearning for something she knew not what.

The ceaseless internal warfare was too harrowing for the child's frail body and it had collapsed.

Father Pierre said many prayers, made many mementos for the little sufferer. He had been greatly disappointed when even the medical expert offered no solution as to cause or cure. "We must send for Margaret's mother," he told the abbess. "The child, while not in danger, is growing weaker. She is not getting well, I've lost hope in the doctors."

"I shall write today," answered the abbess. "I have been considering for some time about advising Madame Alacoque of her little girl's condition but hesitated to worry her while there was still even a faint hope of recovery. Sister Josephine informs me that it is only a week since Margaret has been able to sit up in bed and write her usual letter to her mother every Saturday. No matter how ill the poor child felt, she always made a special effort to write to her mother but now she can't even do that."

"Better for her mother to come and take her home while she is still able to be moved," said the chaplain sadly. "This disease is progressive. Day by day she weakens, day by day she suffers more pain. Soon she will become a skeleton, if nothing can be done."

The abbess sighed and tears filled her eyes. "I fear the poor dear child is not long for this world. God wants her for Himself."

"Perhaps she may take a turn for the better when she is home with her mother," speculated Father Pierre.

"It will be a difficult journey for Madame Alacoque," said the abbess, "and I am afraid she will be greatly shocked by the change in her daughter."

"It might be wise to write to Margaret's uncle, the cure of Verosvres," replied Father Pierre, "and suggest that he accompany Madame Alacoque to Charolles."

The abbess looked relieved. "It would be excellent,

Father. I am so glad you thought of that, for I doubt if Margaret's mother could cope with the situation alone. She seems rather helpless, poor lady."

Father Pierre and Father Antoine were old friends. As he sat at his desk, writing the letter, he thought of Father Antoine's last visit to the convent several months before Margaret's illness, how he had brought her a huge box of bonbons and how he had laughed until his sides shook at her mischievous antics. Father Pierre paused and glanced down into the empty schoolyard. He dipped his quill in the ink and continued his letter: "There are more things, mon pere, than appear on the surface in this strange affliction that has befallen your little niece. . . ."

The Vow

V

"*Sleep, dear child, sleep,*" murmured Madame Alacoque, her words a maternal caress. For hours she had been attempting to soothe her restless daughter, facing with the unquenchable love of motherhood the sight of the sufferings which caused the thin little face to quiver and the luminous dark eyes to brim with agony. This had been a very difficult day for Margaret, but now that the violet shadows of the mountains were spreading their quiet veils over earth and the only vestige of day left, a dim rose color in the western sky, perhaps Margaret might have a peaceful night.

Maybe the dread malady which had reduced her daughter to a paralytic state was reversing itself, pain by day,

instead of night. Maybe, and a faint hope stirred her sorrowful heart, maybe a change for the better might take place. As she slipped noiselessly from the sick room, Philiberte looked with lingering fondness on her daughter's pale face. She was breathing easier, the dark lashes covered those haunting eyes. With a silent thanksgiving the exhausted mother went downstairs to catch a few hours' sleep.

When Margaret awakened shortly after, the soft glowing moonbeams had penetrated the room. This was the first night in many months that she had a respite from the constant, enduring torment. The intolerable anguish of those endless nights was gone. Pain had intensified her senses and she could hear the faint rustlings of animal life on the farm. She watched the moonbeams, which seemed to be alive, retreat until at last they were gone. Through the narrow opening of the window wispy, indistinct clouds, like fine lace, grew faint and vanished. Then the stars appeared; they winked and glowed in golden majesty.

"Oh, how long have I lain here!" she murmured. Beyond the dark azure of the sky her soul winged its way to God. Suffering had beaten and torn her body to such an incredible state that fiery mists obscured her vision. And then came moments in which the soul floated away in space, when she found God and could see and hear in a most extraordinary manner.

"I have been here for an eternity," she thought. "I know not time any more, though I see the pink flush of dawns and the fiery glow of sunsets. I hear the rooster crow, the cries of human voices, the lowing of oxen, the shrill neighing of horses. My little room is a prison but in this prison God has come very close."

One could not measure time here, though Margaret knew that it was four years since her illness had come upon her in the convent at Charolles. She was fourteen now, no longer a child, for her long ordeal had made her far more

"Behold This Heart"

mature than the average girl of her age. Despite the terrible paralysis, she was part of the life of Lhautecour. It distressed her greatly to think that she was a burden in the home, though her mother passionately denied this. At times, when she thought of the lonely wild country, she longed for freedom to leap the foamy brook, to climb the granite hills, to be like the frolicsome colts and the silly little calves with their huge eyes and soft floppy ears. And then her mind would think oppositely, here I am alive, here I know God. It was frightening. She would take her rosary, that lovely creation of pearl which the countess had given her, and prayers to the Virgin would calm her troubled spirit.

Not only through the narrow window would life be a visitor; he came through the door and was more disturbing through that entrance at times. Her poor mother, whose face, once soft and beautiful, was growing more haggard as time dragged by. Never would Margaret let her mother suspect that, devoted as she was, there was a helpless touch to her hands; that her efforts, motivated by mother love, were not often successful in soothing pain. Better the rough, direct methods of old Felice, who aided in nursing her, for she required constant attention.

Father Antoine came as well but he did not seem the same jolly uncle. There was something which he tried hard to conceal but her eyes read the difference. He tried to cheer her up with talk of her big brothers, Jean and Philibert at Cluny, with stories of Chrysostom's boyish adventures and the funny answers Jacques gave at school, but the old lighthearted spirit of hilarious merriment was gone. Something disturbed him. Margaret sensed that all was not right at Lhautecour. Her Aunts Benoitte and Catherine never remained for long when they visited the sick room and Uncle Toussaint had grown almost mute. Yes, Lhautecour had changed since her father passed. She

knew it and at times she wept as she thought of the olden days.

One morning her mother appeared, looking unusually distraught. Something unpleasant had occurred, Margaret was certain, as she saw the hurt look in her dark eyes. Could it have been connected with the scolding tones of Benoite which had dimly reached her room an hour before?

"Oh, if only I could get up and help you, Mother dear," cried Margaret on impulse.

Philiberte smiled faintly as she placed a cold cloth on her daughter's head. "Some day you will, my child. How do you feel?"

Margaret was used to the question, which had lost all meaning. She was suffering intensely at the moment and only her mother's troubled face drew her attention from the violent pains. "I am a burden, Mother. I know that this whole household must feel the burden in many ways. It would be better for all if I—"

Her mother stopped her with an eloquent cry. "Oh, no, no, never say you would want to leave us!"

A severe dart of pain caused Margaret to gasp; her thin little fingers opened and her rosary fell to the carpet. Philiberte bent over and picked up the rosary, placed it back in her daughter's hand and continued to hold the hand in her own. Her sensitive heart was racked to its core as she witnessed the convulsive expression on Margaret's face but knowing that she could do nothing to relieve her, she did not move.

The habit of prayer was instinctive in Philiberte Alaconque and faced by this ordeal of physical suffering, her very helplessness flung her soul to the Faith for relief. And as the beads, hanging from her daughter's insensate clasp, touched her hand, Philiberte quite naturally appealed to the Virgin for aid. It seemed to her that immediately after this silent petition Margaret's stiff fingers relaxed.

"Behold This Heart"

"There, there, my child, you are better already. Holy Mary has answered my prayer."

It was true; the spasm of pain had subsided and Margaret's contorted features became tranquil. She had lost consciousness during the paroxysm but now her mind reverted to her last conscious thought. "You see, mother. Always someone must watch, bring me food, bathe me. I am more helpless than an infant."

Her mother raised a restraining hand. "Please, Margaret, don't speak like that. Let me think . . . Something has come into my heart. Be very quiet for a moment."

Watching her mother with quickening interest, Margaret saw hope beginning to lift the droop of her lips. Philiberte's eyes were half closed but now they opened and she saw a new light in their depths.

"I have a great thought, Margaret," said her mother, a strange ring in her voice. "Rather, the Holy Virgin has given me this great thought."

"Tell me, Mother," begged Margaret. Anything said of the Blessed Virgin always attracted her.

"I shall try. When you dropped your rosary I picked it up and it was the touch of the beads that made me cry out in my heart to Our Mother. Then came the idea, not all at once, but unfolding."

Her mother was quiet again, as if she were waiting for an inspiration to complete her thought or formulate it clearly. Then she leaned forward and asked: "Why not make a vow to Our Lady that if she will cure you, you will some day be one of her daughters?"

Margaret was surprised, so surprised and so deeply moved by the unexpected suggestion that she could not answer at once. It did not at all disturb her, for she greatly admired the nuns at Charolles and considered their lives sublime. Philiberte said nothing during this long silence but her heart was beating furiously, for upon the girl's decision might

depend life or death. Now that she had made known her grand idea she was eager to gain Margaret's consent and could see no reason why she would not assent. It was a matter of living or dying—all was to be gained and nothing lost—and she was puzzled at Margaret's apparent hesitance. Surely there could be nothing repugnant in the religious life to one who had been so extraordinarily devout as a growing child and in these last four years of suffering had shown such bravery and such great depths of faith?

At last Margaret opened her pale lips and Philiberte bent close so that not a single word might escape her. "The idea pleases me, Mother, but . . ." Her voice subsided as she paused to formulate her words.

"But what?" cried her mother, unable to control her excitement.

"Long, long ago I took a vow of chastity and at that time the words meant nothing to me, but now I know what the vow will mean. Would it make you happy, Mother?"

"Oh, yes, my poor lamb," answered her mother with desperate fervor, for she was convinced that her child's life depended on this pledge to the Virgin. "I would be the happiest woman in all France."

Margaret's thin little hand pressed hers with a touch as light as a feather and her lips curved upward in the ghost of a smile. "That makes me happy too, Mother, but I could not take this vow just to make you happy, could I? One must be called to the convent life. If I had been well, I am sure I would have wanted to be a nun. But this is like a bargain."

"But what a heavenly bargain!" broke in Madame Ala-coque. "Did not Holy Mary give me this blessed thought? If Our Lady hears you, then it is a sign, a clear sign from Heaven that you are called to the convent life."

"Then I shall take the vow," replied Margaret, looking steadfastly at the picture of the Blessed Virgin on the wall

"Behold This Heart"

facing her bed and holding her rosary tightly. "Dear Mother, should it be your mercy to heal me, then I shall one day serve you as a daughter."

Philiberte fell to her knees and with clasped hands joined in the petition. The feeble voice faded and a strange silence pervaded the little chamber. Outside the ancient well creaked as the ropes were drawn, thoughtless laughter floated up to the window as the servants went about their tasks. But mother and daughter did not hear, for their souls were transported above the earthly.

At last Philiberte rose from her knees and glanced down at Margaret. She was sleeping. Her mother looked more intently at the quiet form. Was there a difference? Was there a softening, a repose in the face? Yes, she was sure of it. She tiptoed softly out the door, a great joy flooding her weary body. . . .

* * * *

From that hour Margaret continued to improve. Gradually the flesh formed over the emaciated body, the deep hollows of the eyes filled, the terrible paralysis disappeared. Life became endurable, convalescence shortened. Was it a miracle? Philiberte Alacoque was certain that the cure came through the intercession of Our Blessed Lady but others were not convinced. A miracle was something which happened suddenly, like Lazarus coming forth from the grave, like the blind Bartimeus at Jericho's gate. Here was a slow, languid, almost imperceptible recovery. If Margaret were cured by a miracle, she did not proclaim the fact herself. The long agonizing vigils were over, life had taken another bend. It was thrilling to sit up, to stand, to move as others. The preying, inescapable thought of being a useless burden, especially to her troubled mother, was gone. Now she would soon be a part of the active scene, like a traveler lost in some remote country, finding his way and certain of the

road. The new, invigorating condition made her strive to open the door and walk out into the beloved sunshine. The echoes of human activities which had come through the narrow window, the wheeling sun, moon and stars observed through the same constricted space, distorted by reason of her pain-clouded vision, now became clear and distinct. As she sat at her little table, eating with appetite, the desire to use arms and legs, eyes and ears, was strong upon her.

This was the early and pleasant change, but there was a dark side to the picture. Even when bedridden, Margaret sensed that the Lhautecour she had known as a child had suffered a transformation, and that something more than her own illness was affecting her mother. Now she began to realize what had happened. Bit by bit came the tragic knowledge of her mother's position in the home of which she had once been mistress.

It began one morning when a chance remark of her mother's gave Margaret a sudden notion. She had been combing her hair before the mirror when Philiberte had come and stood beside her. "Look, my little one, you are as tall as your mother! That comes from lying in bed so long." Margaret had nodded with a smile at her mother's reflection. Yes, it was so, this slender young person with the long dark hair, framing an innocent face and great brown eyes, stood shoulder to shoulder with the grey-haired woman, whose lined features, especially the tired eyes, bore a time-worn but still strong resemblance to the girl's.

After her mother left, Margaret walked softly to the door and waited, her hand on the knob. Cautiously, she opened it a little and peeped into her mother's large room which adjoined her own small one. It was empty as Madame Alacoque had gone into the hall leading from this wing of the house to the living rooms. When she was sure that

she was quite alone, Margaret stepped into her mother's room. She was smiling to herself, for she intended to surprise her mother by dressing up. She had no dresses of her own, after being an invalid so many years, but that did not matter now that she had grown enough to wear her mother's clothes. "I'll pick something short and very simple," she decided, her hands trembling with excitement. "Then when I appear fully clothed mother and everyone else will know how strong and well I am."

She went to her mother's large wardrobe, and opened the door, then stepped back in blank surprise. The clothes closet was empty except for a shabby house dress of heavy black material with a black mantle and a solitary bonnet reposing on the shelf. They were old and mended and sombre enough to suggest mourning and indeed these sad black garments were all that was left of Madame Alacoque's clothes from the time her husband had died six years before. Her wardrobe had never been replenished. The well-worn toes of a pair of old shoes protruded from under the black dress. Margaret picked them up and turned them over. The soles were broken.

She closed the wardrobe door and dropped into the nearest chair, for she was a little breathless. "Why, mamma must have no clothes!" she said aloud. Now she began looking around the familiar room with a new appraisal in her eyes, noticing how worn the carpet, how faded the draperies. The crystal candelabra, that used to gleam with many lights when she was a little girl, held only a few candle stubs. The great carved bed, where Margaret and her six brothers and sisters had come into this world, was bare of canopy or counterpane; the tapestry covers of the once handsome chairs were worn thin—everything had a forlorn air, a suggestion of despair.

With growing excitement Margaret opened the hall door and stepped into the long corridor. She paused at the room

that had been her father's office and turned the door-knob. "Keep out of there," said a strident voice, and Margaret whirled to find old Jeanette, peering at her from the opposite doorway. "That's the master's office," she croaked, eyeing Margaret with disfavor. "No one is allowed there except my mistress and Mademoiselle Catherine. The door is always locked."

"It doesn't matter, Jeanette," said the girl, ignoring the woman's manner, which had always been disagreeable. "I thought I would dress myself and go out today. I feel so much better. Perhaps you might find some clothes for me to wear until I can get my own?"

Margaret was totally unprepared for the old servant's reaction to the simple request. "You'll find your own clothes and wait on yourself, you little nobody," she snarled so venomously that the girl shrank from her in alarm. "You and your mother are nothing in this house. Nothing!" And she waved both arms in a gesture of far-reaching contempt.

A figure appeared behind Jeanette. Margaret recognized her Aunt Catherine who seemed not a bit displeased by the servant's insolence towards her niece. With humility born of her experience, the young girl stammered out her request for something to wear in public. "Come with me," said her aunt, beckoning her into the long chamber which had formerly been used as a sitting-room, but now had taken on the look of a workshop. Indicating a straight chair, she bade Margaret be seated, and turned to a pile of garments on a sewing-table.

"These were just finished yesterday," she said, poking through the pile until she selected a rough, plain dress of dark blue homespun such as were worn by the servant-maids. "Here, this should fit well enough. And you'll need some underwear—" she began pulling out drawers in a large press against the wall, selecting various garments all of the

coarsest materials and workmanship. "Take these to your room and put them on. I'll send you a pair of shoes."

"Thank you, Aunt Catherine," said Margaret accepting the peasant garb with such a stunned look that her aunt was unable to suppress a faint smile of derision. "These are for every day," she vouchsafed. "On Sundays you will have something better to wear to church."

Margaret had an uneasy sense of foreboding as she went back to her mother's room and began putting on the coarse, ill-fitting clothes. The exertion tired her and she was resting when Felice came in, a distressed look on her wrinkled face. "What's the matter?" cried Margaret. The faithful old soul's features worked convulsively, for she was struggling to hold back her tears.

"Behold, these are the shoes your Aunt Benoitte has sent you, my poor lamb." And she held up for Margaret's inspection a pair of wooden shoes. "Oh, oh, your mother's heart will break when she sees you."

Indeed, Philiberte burst into tears when she returned a few moments later and discovered her daughter dressed like a dairy maid. Felice mingled her tears with those of her mistress. "My poor lady, if only you had asserted yourself years ago," she lamented, "this could not happen now to Claude Alacoque's only daughter."

Philiberte dried her eyes and stood up with a rare show of defiance borne of maternal feeling. "You are right, Felice," she cried. "Come, Margaret, we are going to your aunt. She shall not make a peasant of you. She dare not."

But poor Madame Alacoque's brief display of spirit collapsed when she faced her strong-minded sister-in-law, who stared at her with cold scorn and reminded her that her own children wore wooden shoes. "They are good enough for the Delaroches," she stated with flashing eyes, "and they are good enough for the Alacoques. We are all plain people here and as long as Toussaint is the guardian of

Claude's children, his wife will pick their clothes for them."

Margaret put an arm around her weeping mother and led her away. "There, there," she murmured, "don't cry so, Mother dear. I don't mind wearing these clothes, I'm so glad to be able to wear them."

"My poor darling," worried Philiberte, "you'll have a relapse after all this excitement—"

"No, no," broke in Margaret, who was actually laughing, "I'm ever so much stronger than I was when I got up this morning. I want to go out and take a walk."

Mother and daughter went into the courtyard, and Margaret led the way to the open fields. Her cumbersome shoes made each movement awkward but she pressed eagerly forward. Her eyes were dancing with excitement, her cheeks flushed with color. "We can only go a short way," warned Philiberte.

"I want to reach that big rock where Chrysostom and I had our playhouse when we were little," responded Margaret. "It's not far and we can rest for a while there before we start back."

They sat down at the foot of the old landmark and Margaret buried her face in the sweet purple heather which covered the fields in autumn. "This is heaven," she murmured. "I believe I could climb up on top and see the church steeple over the tree tops."

Philiberte was aghast at the suggestion. "You are only joking, my precious. Come, it is time to go back. Your Aunt Benoitte will be displeased if we are late for the midday meal. You will see the church when we go to Mass next Sunday—"

"But why should we wait until next Sunday?" broke in Margaret impulsively. "Today is only Tuesday. Let us drive over tomorrow and spend the whole day with Father Antoine, and see Chrysostom and Jacques. Won't they be surprised, Mamma?" Margaret rolled over with a happy

sigh and looked up at the deep blue heavens. "And I can make a long visit, oh such a long visit, to the Blessed Sacrament."

She closed her eyes and lay still, savoring the bliss of that reunion. Another day, a matter of hours, and she would kneel once more before the tabernacle, face to face with her Eucharistic God, after all the years of pain and loss. Slowly her eyes opened and met her mother's. Philiberte was looking at her with the distress of a fond mother who knows she must grievously disappoint a beloved child. "You do not understand," she said. "We cannot drive to Verosvres. The carriage is not for us. Your Aunt Benoitte would be outraged if I dared ask for it."

"Outraged," repeated Margaret sitting up. "What do you mean, Mamma?"

Madame Alacoque's hands fluttered nervously and she hesitated before answering, reluctant to reveal the whole truth of their abject state, yet knowing that Margaret must inevitably discover it. "You will find out what I mean soon enough, dear child. It is hard for me to tell you these things, but the carriage is never used for pleasure trips. Your uncle and aunt consider such excursions a great waste of money and time. I am only permitted to ride in the carriage on Sunday to attend Mass."

"Never mind, Mamma," said Margaret with resolute cheerfulness, for poor Madame Alacoque was again on the verge of tears. "Before long I shall be able to walk all the way to the church. It's only a mile from here if one takes the short cut through the fields."

Despite the disagreeable surprises of the morning, Margaret felt light-hearted. She had made up her mind not only to walk to church, but to attend Mass on the following Saturday. It was the Feast of the Holy Rosary, and Margaret intended to renew her sacred pledge to her Beloved Mother, and to thank her for making her well again.

She began making all sorts of happy plans for the great day. How glad her uncle would be to see her at Mass. He would take her over to the presbytery with him and she would have a wonderful visit with Chrysostom and Jacques. They would expect her to stay overnight and in the afternoon she would go to confession. Sunday morning she would receive Holy Communion. Father Antoine would not allow her to go up to the altar rail in wooden shoes. He would laugh when he saw them. He would buy her a decent pair to wear to church on Sunday.

Of course she would need a bonnet, and some sort of cloak to wear Saturday morning. Her mother warned her that everything was kept under lock and key, that her aunts were the only dispensers of all articles of food and clothing. Margaret must ask Aunt Benoit for the necessary articles. She decided to do so the first time they met.

Her aunt's response shattered her brief dream of happiness. When Benoit learned that her niece wanted to attend Mass in the morning, she scolded her severely and forbade her leaving the grounds. "You will go to Mass on Sunday and holydays like other working people," she pronounced, "and you'll stay at home and attend to your duties on week-days. What would become of us if everyone wanted to run off to church every morning? There are plenty of tasks to be done around a farm and every pair of hands is needed. And since you are well enough now to walk miles to the church, you are able to do your share of the work."

Here was captivity no less harsh and binding than when she lay in her narrow bed, unable to move her paralyzed limbs.

The Tyrants

VI

Rene Collard came slowly up the leaf-strewn trail which wound through the copse on the edge of Lhautecour. Ahead in the tenuous gloaming, the cows drifted on. They reached the wooden bars which prevented their entrance into the meadow. Rene's large black dog trotted around the animals, its yellow eyes alight with earnest, eager purpose. The cows bunched together, quietly awaiting their master's approach to open the way for them. It was only the third time they had taken this direction—Rene had changed their pasture—but already they had grown accustomed to it.

Young Collard was lean and hard as a young tree, his face tanned by sun and wind to mahogany. He had left his

father's little farm in the grey of dawn that morning and now it was the purple of oncoming night, yet he was not fatigued. He patted the great white and spotted beasts as he walked among them, lifting aside the bars with an easy movement. Rene's keen grey eyes caught the shadowy outline of the big granite rock to the southward. It was a landmark; everybody knew the rock of Lhautecour. Some day when he might be walking along without his herd, he would climb up that rock. There were times when he wished he could leave his cows in their sheds and rove alone, accompanied only by his dog.

Even as he thought of the faithful dog, he saw it suddenly whirl, then bark. All the slowness, the careless gait, of the cowherd vanished, and he was instantly alert; his gaze followed the dog. Along the winding path, he saw a huddled form lying so still that one might almost mistake it for a little pile of clothes or an old cloak.

Swiftly bounding ahead, the dog reached the object, sniffed and wagged its tail. Rene ran forward and saw that it was the figure of a woman, though whether she were living or dead he could not tell at a glance. Kneeling down, he peered into the upturned face of a young girl. The eyes were closed, she scarcely seemed to breathe, but a faint pulse stirred in her wrist. He touched the icy cold hands, calloused like his own from rough work. Some poor little dairy maid, who had fallen ill by the road or perhaps lost her way. He spoke gently to her but there was no response.

From a small hamper slung over his shoulder, he took a flask of water and, lifting the unconscious girl, pressed a few drops to her lips. She stirred and swallowed them. A low moaning sound broke from her, almost like the pitiful cry of a lost lamb. It touched Rene to the heart.

Suddenly her eyes opened and stared blankly at him. They were large and brown—beautiful in a rare, unearthly way, and profoundly sad. And now Rene knew who she

was, Margaret Alacoque, the girl who had been cured last year by a miracle at Lhautecour. She had been paralyzed for a long time. The cure of Verosvres was her uncle, but she stayed here with her aunts. He had never seen her at any of the festivals or gatherings of the countryside; only from a distance at Sunday Mass in the village.

"What is the matter, Mademoiselle?" he asked gently, as if speaking to a little child in distress. "Tell me, are you ill?"

The girl did not speak, but sat up, and consciousness returned to her eyes. She looked at him with no sign of recognition and flinched from his touch. "Be not afraid," he implored. "It is Rene Collard, your neighbor. Perhaps a drink of water, a little food, may revive you."

She drank deeply and swallowed the bits of food he gave her with eager appetite. She is half starved, said Rene to himself, wondering why anyone from Lhautecour should go hungry. It was the most prosperous farm in the whole countryside. The food gave her strength; she stood up and looked towards Lhautecour. "Ah, you are better," said Rene. "That is good. I shall take you home."

But she stepped back like a frightened creature of the wilds. He saw the timid expression in her eyes. "Thank you, Monsieur, thank you," she said in a voice that was low and sweet like a soft, clear bell.

Before Rene could reply, she had melted into the shadows. He stood looking after her, listening to the faint rustling of her footsteps, undecided whether to follow her or not. Then he began herding his cows homeward.

"Rene," said his sister Magdalen after supper, "why do you sit moping before the fire? Have you forgotten what I told you this morning about Genevieve and her brother? They will be here in a little while. Don't you think you should fix up a bit?"

Her brother looked up with an absent air. "It slipped my mind. I was thinking of something very odd that happened

on the way home tonight. You would scarcely believe it possible," and he looked at the rest of the family to include them in the conversation; "but I found the Delaroches' niece lying in the road. At first I thought it was a dead person, but she was faint from hunger. Now isn't that a strange thing?"

"Not so strange as one might think," said Mother Collard, looking up from her mending. "Our neighbors, the Du Charmes, have fed the poor child more than once. Yes, and given her milk and eggs to take to her mother."

"Well," remarked Father Collard, taking his long pipe from his mouth, "this is the first I've heard of it."

"Louise Du Charme told me as a dead secret," explained his wife, "and warned me not to tell anyone. She would not want to anger Madame Delaroche or her sister. They have tongues like vixens. I would never have mentioned it if Rene had not found out for himself."

"Oh, that's no secret," spoke up Magdalen. "The girls who work for the Delaroches can tell you how they treat the Alacoques. Just ask Genevieve."

"But surely they would have enough to eat," insisted Rene. "They must have a great plenty at Lhautecour."

"To be sure they have, son," said Mother Collard, "but Madame and Mademoiselle Catherine watch every crumb. Where could you find two stingier women?"

"Genevieve was telling me," went on Magdalen, "how poor Madame Alacoque once gave a beggar some food and they made her do without supper. And sometimes when they are seated at the table Madame Delaroche will remark that only those who have earned their food are entitled to eat."

"Tut, tut, that's a shame!" cried Grandfather Collard from his seat in the corner. "There never was a more charitable person than Claude Alacoque, and his good wife was the same. No one was ever sent away hungry from Lhaute-

cour in the old days. I, myself, have seen Monsieur Alacoque give a ragged man the coat off his own back like the holy St. Martin."

"Really, grandfather!" exclaimed Magdalen. "Too bad his sisters are so different, especially the old maid. Genevieve heard her scolding Margaret for reading her prayer-book at night and wasting the candle. She told her that she would not let her have a candle if she caught her at it again. Said she could read her prayerbook in church on Sunday and say her prayers in the dark."

"Dear me, what a life," sighed kind-hearted Mother Collard, "no wonder she runs away. She must be afraid to go to her meals."

"She's a timid, lovely creature," said Rene. "Her eyes are the most beautiful I have ever seen."

Magdalen was amazed. "Margaret Alacoque pretty? Why, Rene, you must not have had a good look at her. I think she is quite plain with that big mouth and those straight eyebrows."

"I did not say she was pretty," cried her brother impatiently. "No, she is not at all pretty—beautiful; there's a difference."

A knock sounded on the door while they were still discussing Margaret, and Genevieve Fuqua, a small, pert, blonde girl, came in. She was followed by her brother Charles, a shy, broad-shouldered youth, whose tanned, rugged features were suffused with blushes.

"What do you think, Genevieve," said Magdalen, as soon as the guests were settled, "Rene met Margaret Alacoque in the lane tonight and he thinks she's beautiful, especially her big, brown eyes."

This was disconcerting news for Genevieve, and the arch glance she was casting at Magdalen's handsome brother changed suddenly to naive chagrin. Rene glared angrily at his sister. "You chatter like a magpie," he growled. "All I

did was help the girl when I found her lying ill by the roadside."

Genevieve tossed her head. "So you are playing Good Samaritan to beautiful maidens in distress," she said. "Though I would hardly call the queer little Alacoque girl a beauty. She is very young, hardly fifteen. Such a quiet, odd creature."

"An aristocrat," remarked Father Collard. "Isn't this the one that lived at the chateau, mother?"

"The same," said his wife, "and later she attended the convent at Charolles. Ah, it is a shame for her to work like a dairy maid—"

"Her hands are as hard as ours from farm work," put in Rene.

Genevieve's grey eyes flashed jealously. "So you have been holding hands with the aristocrat!" she flared.

Rene's face darkened, and he jumped up. "I'd better go," he said, "since every word I say is twisted into a wrong meaning."

Genevieve was on her feet in an instant. "Oh, don't leave on my account," she retorted. "Charles and I were going anyway. I only intended to tell Magdalen—"

But Rene went out, banging the door behind him. The visitors did not prolong their call, and after they left, Magdalen's mother looked at her reprovingly. "Now see what your long tongue has done. Genevieve is furious, and Rene is too blind to see that the girl is smitten with him. That's why she's jealous of that poor little innocent."

"The whole thing is nonsensical," said Father Collard, knocking the ashes from his pipe and depositing it on the mantelpiece. This was the signal for going to bed. Magdalen consoled herself with the thought that Genevieve would forget all about the incident by morning. "The next time she sees Rene, she'll be twice as nice to him," she predicted. "It will blow over."

Part of her prophecy proved correct, for Genevieve did not take out her spite on young Collard, reserving it instead for Margaret Alacoque. Blinded by jealousy, she dropped a hint here and there, which soon grew into an ugly story. Before long it reached the ears of Catherine Alacoque, who never doubted for a moment the unfounded rumors against her unsuspecting niece.

About this time Margaret approached her Aunt Benoitte for permission to attend Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament one Sunday afternoon at Verosvres. Grudgingly, she consented and the girl ran to her mother's room to say goodbye. Madame Alacoque smiled happily when she saw her daughter's face glowing with pleasure. "I'll stop and see Father Antoine," she said, "and ask him the news from the boys." Chrysostom and Jacques were now at Cluny with their two older brothers.

It was a cold November afternoon and Margaret wore a heavy cloak and an old bonnet that had belonged to her aunt. She was tying the string under her chin and walking with quick, light steps through the corridor when she met her Aunt Catherine. "Where are you going?" she demanded.

"To Benediction in the village," answered Margaret; and noticing the disapproval in her manner, she quickly added: "Aunt Benoitte has given me permission."

"Well, I say you aren't going anywhere," snapped Catherine. "Give me that bonnet and cloak."

Margaret had encountered disappointments like this before when either aunt would revoke the other's permission. She looked pleadingly into the stony face. "Please let me go, Aunt Catherine," she begged. "I haven't been to Benediction in such a long time. Please."

"I forbid you to leave," her aunt said sharply. "You may have fooled your Aunt Benoitte with your plausible story

about going to Benediction but I know better than to believe—”

“Aunt Catherine, what do you mean?” cried Margaret.

“You know what I mean, you sly minx, pretending you want to go to church—”

“I’m not pretending. I do want to go. Please don’t stop me.”

For answer her aunt pulled the bonnet rudely from her head. “Now will you do as I say,” she cried.

Margaret could no longer hold back her tears. “Why do you treat me like this, Aunt Catherine?” she sobbed. “What have I done?”

“You know what you’ve done,” answered her aunt. “You’ve been meeting boys in the lanes, and now you’re crying because you can’t keep your appointment with one of your swains in the village.”

The poor girl was horrified, but the more she shook her head and wept, the more Catherine gloated over her misery. “Cry away but don’t expect me to believe that you’re shedding a bucketful of tears just because you can’t go to church. Only a fool would swallow such a thin story.”

Margaret tried to stifle her tears but the harder she fought to control them, the faster they flowed. Yet she must be still, for she was beginning to attract attention. Someone was coming towards them and, looking up, she recognized Felice. The old servant took in the situation at a glance and threw her arms around the girl with a protecting gesture. She glared angrily at Catherine. “What have you been saying to the poor little lamb?” she asked.

“Your precious little lamb turned out to be a black sheep,” sneered Catherine. “I just caught her in a big lie. She was slipping off to meet some young fellow in the village and tried to cover up with a cock-and-bull story about going to church.”

"It's you that lies," screamed Felice. "How can you dare to say such things in front of this sweet, innocent angel?"

"Shut up, you insolent, meddling old fool!" ordered Catherine. "You forget your place."

"My place is here beside my mistress' child and I won't be shut up any longer," answered Felice, recklessly brandishing her fist in Catherine's face. "You're a mean, black-hearted hag, and God will punish you for your evil slanders."

"This is unbearable," stammered Catherine, retreating before the fury of the old servant. "Wait until my sister hears of your scandalous behavior. She'll send you packing."

"Your sister is no better than you are," Felice shouted after her. "And some day you'll both have to get out, mark my words."

But it was Felice who had to leave Lhautecour, and bid farewell to the two beings she loved most and served with such fierce loyalty. The following morning Madame Delaroché discharged her, ordering her to be off the premises by noon. "And don't let me catch you hanging around here, you ungrateful wretch," she stormed.

Madame Alacoque wept passionately at the parting. Margaret and Felice both tried to console her. "What will become of you now in your old age, my poor Felice?" she asked.

"I have a nephew in Macon, who has wanted me to stay with him for a long time, dear lady. I shall have a good time, and God will take care of me. He always has."

"Then you will be better off, ending your days in peace," replied Philiberte. "We shall miss you sorely, but for your own sake I am glad you are leaving this house of strife."

Neither Philiberte nor her daughter realized how greatly they would miss the devoted services of their old friend,

for the time soon came when she was needed as never before. One day when Margaret came from the well, where she had been drawing water, she saw her mother leaning against the wall in the small pantry that separated the kitchen from the dining-room. There was something in her attitude which brought a sharp pang to her daughter's heart. Poor mother, she was not strong enough for laborious housework and now she must be so worn out that she was using the wall as a support.

"What is it, Mother?" asked Margaret, putting her arms around her. "Are you very tired?" Philiberte did not speak at once but kept her head turned aside, and Margaret noticed that she held a handkerchief to it. She was suffering pain, perhaps a sharp toothache. Margaret gently moved the handkerchief so that she might see better. To her consternation she discovered that there was a large red swelling beneath her mother's right eye and down into the cheek. This was no mere toothache.

"Come, Mother, let me put you to bed. You should not be up. I will get some cold cloths and make a poultice." As they left the kitchen they met Benoitte coming from one of her interminable rounds of inspection. "Mother is not well, Aunt Benoitte," said Margaret. "Look at the swelling on her face."

"I know what's wrong with your mother," replied her aunt coldly. "If she would stop her senseless weeping, her face would not be swollen. In all tears there is a certain amount of salt and since she spends half her time snivelling, the salt in these copious tears has entered the skin and caused these bright red spots. Irritation, that's all. And the remedy, stop crying. Quite simple."

"Come, Mother, I shall help you to bed," said Margaret turning away.

"Go back to your work, Margaret," said Benoitte, "and let your mother lie down. You are making a mountain out

of a mole hill." Her bright eyes smoldered with wrath as she looked at the Alacoques. It infuriated her to see that Margaret was not going to do her bidding. Without answering, she continued on her way.

"Very well, you lazy minx," she shouted after her. "But don't come to the table until you have finished your chores."

Margaret tenderly placed her mother in bed and bathed her swollen face, despite her protestations that she could take care of herself and it would be better for Margaret to obey her aunt. "I cannot see you go hungry on my account," she pleaded.

But her daughter's face wore a determined expression. "I shan't starve and you shall have the care you need. If the swelling does not go down, you must have the doctor. That I will do."

Madame Alacoque's worried eyes grew calm. There was a fierce note in Margaret's voice and, reassured, she sank back on the pillow. She could depend on her daughter. Long since, she would have given up without a struggle were it not for Margaret, for despite her youth and gentle, lovable ways, deep in her spirit was a power strong as steel.

Next morning, when Margaret hurried to her mother's bedside, she found that the swelling had increased considerably and was hard and hot to the touch. She applied cold compresses, then went to the kitchen where she was allowed to bring some breakfast to her mother. It was coarse food which Philiberte was unable to eat. "Never mind, Mother," said Margaret, trying to appear cheerful although her heart was heavy, "I know where I can get something nicer."

"Not now, dear," whispered her mother. "I can't eat anything. Maybe later, when I feel a little better."

But poor Madame Alacoque did not feel better. Instead she grew rapidly worse, despite all Margaret's frantic ef-

forts to reduce the swelling. Many, many times the inexperienced girl wished that Felice were there to nurse her mother or to stay with her when she was forced to leave the sick room. Neither of her aunts showed any concern over their sister-in-law's condition, but refused to believe Margaret's anxious pleadings for medical attention. They plainly told her to stop her hysterical nonsense. The swelling would burst as all swellings did in due time and there was nothing to do but wait until nature completed its course.

Days and nights followed the same pattern of anxious ministrations. Then Margaret knew that simple remedies could not help her mother, for the swelling puffed up to an enormous size, closing one eye completely and covering the whole side of her face. It was a dreadful sight and the girl's tender heart quailed when she looked at her mother.

Perhaps if she went to her Aunt Benoite and begged her to come and look at her mother, she would, despite her parsimony and coldness, send for the doctor. But no, Margaret decided, her aunt would be too busy to visit the sick room, she would put her off and maybe, in the end, refuse. Meanwhile her mother's condition was desperate. There was only one thing to do. She must get the doctor herself and bring him here to her mother.

Margaret scarcely noticed the streets, the people or the buildings of Verosyres as she hurried to Dr. Gavet's house. There she received news which stunned her. "The doctor has gone to Macon," his wife told her. "I do not expect him back for at least a week."

She sank into a chair. "There, there, my dear, let me give you a glass of wine," said Madame Gavet. "You must not worry so."

Margaret declined the wine and raced down the street to her uncle, the cure. "You are all upset, dear child," said kind-hearted Father Antoine, patting her shoulder. "We

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shall do all we can for your mother. There is an itinerant doctor who visits the sick folks around Lhautecour. His name is Pierre Rambeaux and I think I can find him. He is just a country doctor, but perhaps your mother is not as sick as you think. I'll know better after I see her. Let us leave at once."

Margaret prayed fervently as they drove through the countryside in the cure's high-wheeled cart. And her prayers were answered, for they had stopped only a few times along the road, when they met a small, stout man with a round rosy face. He was leaving a shepherd's hut, and he carried a small black bag. It was Dr. Rambeaux.

Dr. Rambeaux was not a skilled physician, even when judged by seventeenth century standards, but a glance at his patient was all that sufficed to convince him that she was suffering from a virulent case of acute erysipelas. He judged from the advanced stage of the dreadful malady that there was no hope for her recovery. Slowly he turned and his eyes met Father Antoine's. A grave look passed between the two.

Margaret's lips moved tremulously. "Doctor, what is it? My mother—how do you find her?" It was difficult for her to whisper the words which might mean a tragic verdict.

"Your mother has erysipelas," said the doctor in a low tone, although Madame Alacoque was now unconscious. "I shall bleed her, but that is all I can do."

It was the worst thing he could have done, but this common practice was regarded as a panacea for most ailments by the unenlightened physicians of those unscientific days. All the color drained from the sick woman's face. It was hard to find the slow beating of her pulse.

After a conference with Father Antoine, from which Margaret was excluded, the doctor left. "I have done all I can for the poor lady," he told the priest. "Only a miracle can save her."

When Benoit and Catherine learned the nature of Philiberte's illness, they stayed away from the sick room, fearing contagion. Alone, Margaret remained night and day by her mother's side. Father Antoine came and administered the Last Sacraments. "Courage, my child," he told Margaret. "Prayer and faith are your only hope."

Prayer, faith! She must assail the gates of Heaven to save her poor mother.

It was Christmas time and people were alive with the holy mirth of this blessed season. Ahead was the New Year about to dawn, when hopes and dreams gave cheering promise to weary hearts. But Margaret only vaguely realized the holiday atmosphere. Other than stealing to church on the Nativity, she remained keeping constant vigil over her mother, whose sufferings tore at her anguished soul. Unaided, she strove to alleviate the fearful pain and burning fever. She slept only at odd moments, and scarcely touched food at all. Night and day her prayers ascended to Heaven.

The New Year

VII

New Year's morning! The bells in the church ring out the glad tidings of a new year; an unwritten virginal page opens, a beckoning new trail and a glorious vista stretch before the imagination. It is no wonder that smiles light the faces of the worshippers on their way to church. Today shall be one of gladness, every home shall have its visitors exchanging good wishes.

Near the front of the church kneels Margaret Alacoque, her beautiful face tragic and drained of life. She feels that she can go on no longer; exhaustion has enfeebled her body. She has but one request and she couches it in the simplest form. Her faith sees in the Immaculate Host, our Divine Saviour. He is the last recourse, for science cannot save her

mother, nor nursing, nor doctors. So she says: "Oh, Dear Lord, please be my mother's doctor, cure my mother, tell me what to do."

She hurries back to Lhautecour. Even the short time she was away seems too long. She runs stumbling into the sick room. A terrible sight meets her eyes; the huge abscess on her mother's face has burst, pus flows down on the pillow in a disgusting flood, the odor is nauseating. The girl's heart stands still. Though the sight is terrifying, she realizes that this is a wonderful change for the better. Now there is hope.

Running wildly to her aunts, Margaret breaks the news. "Come, quickly, Aunt Benoitte, Aunt Catherine, come quickly! The abscess is broken. My mother will live. We must do something now, but what, I don't know. I am afraid I have no skill. Please hurry."

Her aunts exchange glances of surprise. Now that the abscess has burst, Philiberte may survive. Returning with Margaret, they enter the room. The foul odor stops them at the entrance, the horrible sight makes them turn pale. Abruptly they leave, and Margaret is alone with her mother. Suddenly she remembers that her request to Our Lord was not only to heal and cure but to teach her how to act.

Ever since she was a small child she has had a great repugnance to the sight of blood and wounds. From her parents she has inherited a keen fastidious sense. Love conquers the revolting. Carefully Margaret washed away the putrefying mass. The patient must be kept clean, the oozing flow constantly wiped away. This is the first step. Another condition exists, however, the flesh around the edges of the abscess has decayed and must be removed. But confidence is growing in her tender heart. The Lord will show her. . . .

Madame Alacoque regained conscious periods after the bursting of the abscess. The nervous torture had to a great

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extent subsided, the seering fever was over. For long she had been in a dark and agonizing purgatory but slowly she became aware of life. Her eyes followed her daughter's actions.

Margaret obtained a small, keen knife and cut away the dead flesh. It took every ounce of courage to perform the operation which had to be done each day. Gladly she perceived that her mother was gaining every day, that new flesh was forming. The Lord, indeed, had been her Doctor!

"Help me out of bed," said Madame Alacoque one morning. "I want to sit by the window and feel the sun. I want to breathe the fresh air."

"Only for a few moments, Mother dear," counseled Margaret, carefully helping her to a chair. As she inhaled the bracing air, Madame Alacoque's eyes brightened. She began talking. "Ah, what a happy place this used to be before your father died." She continued to rehearse the joyful happenings of the past.

"Please let me help you back to bed," begged Margaret. "You will tire yourself out—"

"Only a few moments longer, *ma petite cherie*," and her mother actually smiled, a wan and pitiful sort of smile. "This fresh air is giving me life, though perhaps it might have been better had I died, for we are prisoners here. But I wanted to live for you. If you were alone—oh, I can't bear to think of you alone in this house of hate and cruelty, this miserable state of penury—you the daughter of a brilliant, generous man."

"Oh Mother, let's forget all that. You are alive, alive! The Good God Himself cured you."

But Madame Alacoque did not respond to her daughter's encouraging words. Her mood had suddenly become melancholy as she looked reality in the face. They were hopeless captives under the tyrannical yoke of the implacable Benoitte. She lifted her delicately-molded hands which had

lost their callouses during her illness. The gesture touched Margaret deeply. Her poor mother's hands, meant only for delicate occupation, the hands which had so carefully tended her children, would soon be rough and hard again when she returned to work. The bright joy of recovery was shadowed by a despairing future.

Suddenly they heard voices and a soft knocking on the door. Margaret sprang across the room and opened it. Then her heart gave a tremendous bound, for there stood her brothers, Jean, Philibert, Chrysostom and little Jacques. Looks of incredulous joy flashed over their faces and they surrounded their mother, flinging their arms about her.

"Mother, you are sitting up," cried Jean, "this is marvelous!"

"Father Antoine sent for us," went on Philibert. "He wrote that you were very, very sick."

"We were almost afraid we would be too late," said Chrysostom. "What a wonderful surprise to find you so well."

"Oh, what a happy ending to our sad journey," cried Jacques.

Their mother's face was suffused with happiness as she pressed each one to her heart and murmured their names. All four embraced their sister joyfully.

"Can you stand some very good news, Mother?" asked Jean, his fine face radiant and his voice ringing with excitement. "Look closely, Mother, look at me and tell me what do you see?"

"You are looking fine, my son, and you are the image of your dear father."

"Is that all?" laughed her eldest. "Mother, have you forgotten what day this is?"

"I hardly know what day it is," confessed Philiberte with a bewildered air. "Indeed, I have even forgotten the month but—"

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"Oh, tell them," cried Chrysostom, "tell them."

"Very well," replied Jean. "This is my twenty-first birthday. That means I have come of age. You now behold the master of Lhautecour."

The import of these astounding words filled his mother's and sister's hearts to overflowing. They were suddenly free!

"And the ancient regime will be fully restored," laughed Philibert. "Long live Jean and Lhautecour!"

* * * *

The return of Claude Alacoque's eldest son as owner of Lhautecour worked an abrupt change in the household. Though only a youth and not at all versed in practical affairs, he had acquired habits of order, discipline and industry at Cluny. In generosity of heart he was very much like his father, yet he had unconsciously assimilated the lessons of true economy during his long years of learning amidst monastic simplicity.

By incessant work and scrimping Toussaint Delaroche had left the estate in excellent condition. All possible rupture between the simple straightforward Jean with his high ideals and Toussaint with his rustic notions was frustrated at the outset. The youth came into his heritage unhampered and free to act without interference.

As soon as the heir arrived, Benoit lost no time in rushing to her husband. At the moment he was reckoning the profits of the pig crop. Pigs were a good investment, roaming the hills and valleys, fed by the bounty of nature and coming home at night to receive only slight attention. There was no waste at Lhautecour, everything was consumed. His wife's peremptory assertion disturbed his pleasant planning.

"We must get out at once!" she announced.

"Go at once?" He regarded her with ox-like gravity,

scarcely comprehending the significance of her words.

"Yes. I will not stay under the same roof with my sister-in-law now that the Alacoques are taking over again." Her words rang with finality, her mind was made up and her husband knew well her adamant character. As the import of the situation reached him, he squirmed in his chair. It was like the approach of a storm which devastates valuable crops but like the storm, there was nothing one could do to avert it. So he sat, stolid and silent.

"Do you hear me?" cried Benoit. "I shall never be under her sway. That young Jean is just like my brother Claude. Soon the old regime will be back—lazy servants, shiftless farm hands, extravagance, waste. All your work will be frittered away. We have done well and can hold our heads high. Look at Lhautecour now, the pride of the countryside, an estate that yields a rich annual income. And remember what a place it was when we took over."

Toussaint remained silent, nodding his head slightly. His wife's words were true but her resolve to leave Lhautecour was fantastical. He had grown accustomed to managing the estate. "We must leave at once," insisted Benoit. "Make a settlement with Jean, and don't be a fool—get all you can. If you don't, it will only be thrown away. Buy the right to a place where you can be your own master. No one understands a farm like you nor how to handle stock. You will be a great success and some day we shall return, rich and powerful, and find our genteel Madame and her useless offspring in rags." Her voice rose to a high pitch as she visualized her triumphant return. Toussaint's brows furrowed in thought. "That sounds fine, Benoit," he conceded, "but farms cost money and I am afraid to spend. If one does not spend one's money it grows, bit by bit, and—"

"You will never get rich that way," interrupted his wife angrily. "You must spend to make more. If you want to

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stay on here as an underling, stay. But I and my sister are leaving."

Toussaint looked alarmed at his strong-minded wife. Perhaps she was right, perhaps he might get a place of his own. "I shall see Jean then," he said after some deliberation, "and if he gives me enough for a good start, we shall go. Besides the land we shall need horses, cows, oxen, plow—"

Benoite interrupted his catalogue of agricultural necessities with a scornful laugh. "Take what you need from LhauteCour. I shall certainly take my share without asking, for I'm entitled to it. Besides I have put away a little nest-egg of my own. So do not be afraid."

"I am very glad you have some money of your own, Benoite," said Toussaint with an air of admiring surprise. "It will be useful for a start."

"What a dolt I have for a husband," thought his wife. "He must be a fool to think that after all our years managing LhauteCour, I would not have abundantly feathered my nest."

And so the Delaroches took their departure and left Jean to manage as best he could. Benoite's eyes wore a look of malicious pleasure as she saw the tall, slender young master of LhauteCour pacing up and down the courtyard. "He won't last long," she decided. "Those weak hands could not hold a plow. Toussaint may be a dumb one, but he's a worker. All he needs is management. Some day we'll be back at LhauteCour and it won't be long."

* * * *

The dark days of Madame Alacoque and her daughter were over. They could hardly realize that they were liberated. The adjustment must be gradual. From a prison, LhauteCour had become overnight a delightful country estate, not a great landed establishment like their neighbor, Corcheval, but a smaller, more home-like addition. Harsh

words and cruel edicts were transferred into gentle, care-free conversation.

"Oh, isn't it wonderful, Mother," sighed Margaret. "Now I can go to church whenever I want. I don't have to secretly visit my old rock and just look at the church."

"Yes, dear child, and the carriage and team is at our service. What a fine, capable man Jean has become. He gets up early, works hard and everybody loves him. And he has time for pleasure, too. Philibert will soon be here to help with the estate. Oh, it is going to be heavenly, ma petite, to be all together again after the years of separation. I can hardly wait until the boys are home."

"But what about Jacques, Mother," mused Margaret, for the youngest member of the Alacoque family had made up his mind to enter the religious life.

"Jacques will always spend the holidays and vacations with us," replied her mother confidently.

"Some day he will be a priest and must leave us," said Margaret, who was thinking of her own sacred pledge.

Madame Alacoque laughed. It was good to hear her mother laugh; Margaret had known nothing but tears during these past years. "I have Jacques' career all planned, my darling. Your Uncle Antoine is getting a little old and by the time Jacques is ordained he will need an assistant. Won't that be wonderful! Our Jacques at Verosvres!"

"But perhaps he may become a monk, one of the Benedictines at Cluny."

Her mother's face clouded. "I'm sure Jacques will not join an order. He is unsuited to that kind of life. No, my dear, Jacques will be right here at home. Isn't it a great blessing of God for all of us to be together. Jacques, my baby, preaching, saying Mass right here in our own parish church."

"Of course, Mother," said Margaret gently, looking at the smile on her face. She was still thin from her illness but

day by day, good food, rest, a happy home were bringing back her health. Margaret was grateful for this and for the great change in their surroundings. Sometimes she experienced such a rush of joyful spirits that she would leap and run through the meadows, cross the brook and climb up on the old rock. It was God's world and a merry one.

Lhautecour took on a new life. It was no longer a farmstead where the sole purpose of life was the production of better crops and herds and the accumulation of money, but an estate, a place of gracious living. Margaret had fine new clothes, all the appurtenances of her social standing. She was young, attractive and now that the rigid discipline was forever banished, gay and amusing. Her eyes looked with delight on all this new and lovely transformation. The sun of prosperity and contentment lighted up Lhautecour.

Gradually visitors began flocking to the place. Jean and Philibert were splendid young men, earnest, sincere and hard-working, they won the respect and admiration of all. Soon they would marry and carry on the traditions of the house. Lhautecour was mirthful with young people, and many a maiden hoped some day to be one of this happy family.

Margaret, too, became a social success, through no effort of her own. Her natural disposition, her generosity of heart, were captivating. Besides she was beautiful of face and form. Her large, lustrous brown eyes glowed with animation. After the years of slavery, of repressed emotions and illness, she took on a new life of great activity, as if making up for lost time. Her gaiety and laughter made her a magnet for the younger people.

But not all the visitors were young, for Madame Ala-coque renewed old friendships and resumed the contacts with her relatives in Macon which had been broken since her husband's death. Like her daughter, she was making up for their bitter captivity. Added to this, she took great

pride in her children and the new Lhautecour, and was eager to show them off. The loneliness of soul endured while the home was in the control of the Delaroches, when Margaret was her only confidante, was gradually disappearing. Philiberte expanded in the gay swirl of social life. With her four sons to lean upon and a loving daughter, who despite her youth still watched over her tenderly, she reached the heights of tranquillity. Such was her happy condition and nothing must change it. She would grow old with her children surrounding her. Deliberately she shut her mind against the inevitable changes and developments of the future like one who builds a wall of sand and heedlessly deems it protection from the relentless tides of the ocean.

Sometimes, unbidden remembrances of the vow made by Margaret at her own suggestion would come to Philiberte, but she dismissed them from her thoughts. Margaret was much too young to make any definite plans for the future. She was still a child and perhaps the Blessed Mother did not really want her to enter the convent; perhaps she would be better pleased if Margaret stayed here with her, for surely she needed her. Wasn't Margaret her only daughter and after all the sufferings they had endured together, wasn't it right to share the happiness of their changed fortune? Besides, Margaret's promise had been exacted under desperate circumstances, almost under duress, one might say, and as such could not be considered binding. And then, too, she was naturally a very lively, high-spirited girl, even the cruel years of their bondage had not robbed her of her love of life. Quite obviously, she was not the type to bury herself in a convent. No, Margaret could have no true vocation to the sisterhood. So why worry about the matter? Better to wait and see.

Thus the mother disposed of her daughter's sacred pledge; but not so the girl herself, for often, as she knelt

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before the Blessed Sacrament, a sense of overpowering longing would assail her, and her heart felt as though pierced with burning darts. And at night in her little room, as she looked at the picture of the Blessed Mother, which had been her solace during her years of agony, the eyes were sadly reproachful, and she seemed to hear a sweet voice chiding her for her indifference. And again the voice would whisper in her heart: "Some day you will put aside this world; some day you will break these ties that bind you. . . ."

And then when Margaret was nearing her seventeenth birthday, a tragic and shocking blow drove all other considerations from her thoughts. Jean, the beloved young master of Lhautecour, who had so much to live for, was suddenly struck down at the age of twenty-three. The whole unfortunate event took place within a few hours coming with the unexpected speed of a hurricane that swoops down from a clear sky and leaves nothing but desolation in its wake. Jean was riding over the estate, as was his daily custom, when he had a slight accident. He had dismounted from his horse and was examining a yoke of oxen, when suddenly one of the animals turned its head and its sharp horn penetrated his arm.

Although an artery was cut, it was only a minor wound which ordinarily would not have serious consequences. But a strange and appalling circumstance turned a trivial mishap into a fatal disaster, for Jean's wound did not stop bleeding. Frantic efforts were made by those who were with him at the time and later by the family doctor, hastily summoned from Verosvres. It was all useless; nothing could staunch the flow of blood. Jean was a "bleeder," one of those rare individuals whose blood cannot coagulate. There was barely time for him to receive Extreme Unction from the hands of his uncle, Father Antoine, before his life drained away.

Lhautecour was a place of sorrow; Madame Alacoque

was inconsolate, and clung more desperately than ever to her daughter. Young as she was, it was Margaret who brought her through the valley of grief. "Brother Jean has gone to join Father," she would remind her mother fondly and confidently. "His life was a happy one while it lasted and in Heaven he is happier, far happier, than he could ever be here. Some day we shall all be together again. So dry your tears, Mother dear, and let us go to the church and pray awhile." Thus Margaret spoke to her mother and not so much the familiar words of faith but the girl's deep sincerity and warmth of spirit soothed the mother's desolate heart.

Death cannot stop the ceaseless flow of life. It was doubly hard on Philibert to lose his brother, for he also lost his dearest and closest companion. The two had never been separated and the close resemblance which in childhood had made people mistake them for twins, had persisted after they were grown. By mutual agreement, Jean, the heir, had carried on the management of the estate, while Philibert had followed his father's profession. It had been an ideal combination but now Philibert must, as best he could, combine both occupations. He plunged into work; the estate and the family became his main interests. In his efforts, he might forget his sorrow and there was consolation, too, in building for the future.

Philibert was twenty-two when he inherited Lhautecour after Jean's two brief years of possession. Yet this promising youth, so like his brother, was destined for an even briefer stewardship. One year after the death of Jean, when Philibert had attained the fatal age of twenty-three, he too was struck down for he had inherited the same strange weakness. In his case the circumstances were entirely different but the tragic results, entirely beyond any reasonable anticipation, were alike.

Both Jean and Philibert had known from childhood that

it was difficult for them to stop bleeding. When they had nose bleeds they lost more blood than the average youngsters; a slight cut would take longer to heal. But neither brother attached any great significance to the phenomenon. They simply took it for granted that this was a peculiarity which required them to be more careful than others. Neither Chrysostom nor Jacques were bleeders, and their sister's sex made her immune, for the disease—if such it be—is never found in the female members of a family, although always transmitted from the maternal side.

There was every hope that, with the proper precautions, Philibert would live to a ripe old age, and after Jean's untimely passing, he resolved to run no risks of a similar misfortune. However, when a tooth became badly abscessed and caused much pain, Philibert had it extracted, never dreaming that such a simple operation might be dangerous. The hemorrhage that followed was excessive, and could not be stemmed. Philibert's life was flowing away, not swiftly like Jean's, but slowly, relentlessly. The best doctors from Charrolles and Macon were summoned, every method for inducing coagulation from the superstitious lore of tradition to the latest scientific discovery, was tried. They were all futile, nothing could halt the terrible bleeding. Chrysostom and Jacques were sent for. Father Antoine, unable to control his grief, wept as he administered the last solemn rites, for he had loved his brother's sons as though they had been his own, and this second loss was crushing.

Philibert's handsome face, ghastly with death, wore a faint smile of Christian resignation. His eyes slowly opened and passed with a flicker of recognition from face to face of the kneeling group. His lips moved: "Chrysostom, you will take over—you are different—" the hands clasping his mother's and sister's tightened in a final grasp. "Do not sorrow."

Philibert's eyes closed, to open no more in this world.

Above her mother's sobbing, Margaret heard her uncle's voice: "It is God's will that he be taken. Put all your trust in Jesus, for He will not abandon you in your sorrow."

"It is God's will." Over and over again during the melancholy days that followed, Margaret repeated those words in her heart. "Who can counteract the will of God," she reflected, "which is always accomplished whether it pleases us or not?"

When her eighteenth birthday came, Margaret seemed farther than ever from her heart's desire. "Your duty is here with your poor mother," whispered an inner voice. "She needs you. If you abandon her now, you will kill her." Sometimes another thought would torment her. "You are convinced that your mother cannot live without you," it ran, "but what about yourself? Can you live without her? What if you did go to the convent and then found out too late that you couldn't stay away from her? That you would be constantly worried about her and your conscience would give you no rest for leaving her? Think of the disgrace if you were to change your mind and run back home." Was it really God's will for her to be a nun? she asked herself. Had she ever been truly called to the religious state?

The Masked Ball

VIII

It is over a year now since the sudden death of Philibert. Life proceeds at Lhautecour, depressed and low-spirited, but gradually recovering, like a flower which has been bruised, wilts, fades, and then begins again to grow and bloom. The virtue of Christian faith hastens the healing process.

For the Alacoques the future will not be without struggle. Changing conditions must be faced or averted and conflicting emotions make for inevitable conflict. Opposing personalities have their motives and these furnish the elements of psychological combat.

Chrysostom is going to be married and his mother objects. Not openly but by devious and endless little innuen-

does, sometimes watered by maternal tears. Margaret, attractive and vivacious, is sought in marriage, but her deep spiritual nature, her strange, mystic experiences turn her away. Her mother, Chrysostom and Father Antoine do not understand her refusal to be a normal girl.

The old stone houses stand stalwart against the storms of the mountain country, quiet and serene in every season, but behind the walls the actors play their parts, sometimes peaceful, but more often moved by fierce and elemental passions.

Chrysostom has grown into a handsome youth, his features not so keenly molded as those of his dead brothers, but pleasing, and his body much stronger. There is a calm in his manner unlike the nervous energy of the other Alacoques. His face this morning is slightly clouded as he gallops his colt up the leafy trail to Corcheval, although he is going to meet his future bride, Angelique Aumonier. She is staying at the chateau. The marriage is a settled affair but just before he left home, his mother wept copiously on his shoulder.

Chrysostom cannot fathom her opposition, for she can offer no reasonable objection to the girl he is marrying. Angelique Aumonier belongs to the old nobility of France, her father is lord of Chalenforge. She is a lovely creature and had many suitors. His mother knows all about the family, for Angelique is a niece of Elizabeth de Fautrieres, whose husband is the son of Margaret's godmother, the Countess. But his mother does object. Perhaps that is the way of all mothers. They want their sons to be bachelors and cannot bear to share them with another woman.

Gradually the frown on Chrysostom's boyish face disappeared as he neared the chateau and his mind became filled with the image of his beloved. Suddenly his horse shied as Margaret came cantering around a sharp bend in the road. Sister and brother paused for a brief chat. Chrysostom sud-

denly recalled that he had an appointment with a painter that afternoon. The interview was one of many for the young heir of LhauteCour intended to decorate the old buildings on the grand scale for the reception of his bride. He had confided his plans to Margaret, who was proving an enormous help to him in this paramount undertaking. They started talking about the remodelling of the old living room, which Chrysostom was converting into a formal drawing room. Before continuing on his way, Chrysostom paused to remark. "Some day soon, I will be helping you when you plan your own household."

It would make him happy to see Margaret married to some fine young chap. He was so deeply in love with Angelique that he wanted Margaret also to fall in love, for love was a divine and enchanting ecstasy. Surely she must not miss life's most wonderful experience. But a stubborn look crossed his sister's face. "I don't care to marry. I shall never marry."

Chrysostom had only intended mentioning the subject in a casual manner but the vehemence in his sister's voice struck him. He could see that she was not only serious but quite determined. "Why, Margaret," he exclaimed, "you aren't allowing Mother to prejudice you against marriage, I hope? Mother is a dear, but if I listened to her I would be a cranky old bachelor. You'll see that she will be completely reconciled after we are married. And when we have children, she will be the happiest grandmother in the world."

"Mother does not object to my marrying," answered Margaret gravely. "She wants me to marry."

Her brother gasped in astonishment. "Then why does she want me to stay single? Can you explain that?"

Margaret's serious mien disappeared and a laugh curved her full lips. "You are a man, Chrysostom, and do not understand women."

The Masked Ball

"What do you mean?"

"Men are men and women are women. In mother's case, she fears a daughter-in-law, for no two women can rule a house."

"Now that's ridiculous!" cried Chrysostom. "Who could fear my angel, my Angelique, the sweetest—"

"Au revoir," laughed Margaret. "Do not keep her waiting. Tonight we shall go into the plans for the drawing room."

The days that followed were crowded with activity. Carpenters and painters swarmed all over the ancient dwellings. Ceilings and walls were embellished with gay hunting scenes, riders on their prancing steeds, hounds sniffing the earth, deer bounding through the green aisles of the forests. The huge beams and wide oak-flooring were refinished and polished until they glowed with a dark and burnished sheen. Furnishings were renovated and new draperies hung. There was the matter of the Alacoque coat-of-arms, important now that Chrysostom was marrying into the nobility. So the family shield was emblazoned over the entrance way, a crimson cock and lion rampant on a field of gold. It was Chrysostom's wish, also, that his elder brothers be remembered in the decorations of Lhautecour and accordingly, a memorial painting portrayed the tombs of Jean and Philibert with an angel hovering over each. Though melancholy, it had beauty and charm and in its soft colors there was a deep sense of repose. On the opposite wall was a picture symbolic of Chrysostom's present happiness, little fat cupids lighting Hymen's torch.

At last the great day arrived. People with distinguished names, members of renowned families, filled the chapel at Corcheval where the wedding took place. Father Antoine celebrated the nuptial Mass, flanked by visiting clergy. There were the purple robes of members of the hierarchy. A gentle murmur of admiration rippled over the congrega-

tion as the bridal party entered. In her beautiful satin wedding gown, Angelique was radiant with the soft bloom of youth. Under her veil of precious heirloom lace the shining chestnut hair framed the cameo-perfection of her delicate, slightly haughty features. But lovely as she was, many thought that Margaret, the maid of honor, eclipsed her classic elegance. There was a fire in her, a deep, burning look in her dark eyes, a rapt expression, as if a strange, holy light were playing over her features. Unconscious of the throng, for she was in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, Margaret preceded the bride to the altar-rail.

As the soft music faded, there came a sob from the first pew. It was Madame Alacoque, unable to restrain herself. Recovering quickly from her outburst of emotion, she appeared serene and calm at the grand reception in the huge drawing room at the chateau. She had a liking for this kind of social affair. Proudly she followed with her eyes her manly son, Chrysostom, and still more proudly her beautiful daughter, Margaret. She delighted in observing the young men gathering around her. And who could resist such a charming girl? Margaret was in one of her gay, amusing moods. Not another girl in the entire assemblage had half her fascination. This was Margaret's proper sphere in life and later, married into an old family, she would make a hostess whom all the world would admire and envy.

Philiberte was living in a perfect fairy land created by her romantic imagination, an earthy paradise where youth, beauty and gaiety mingled against a rich and aristocratic background. She was gazing towards a little group of youths gathered around Margaret at the other end of the room when Chrysostom spoke softly to her. His face was beaming with happiness but his manner was slightly serious. "Angelique and I are going to slip away from the crowd and I won't see you again until we get back from our honeymoon," he began, leading her to a little alcove. "Be-

fore we go I want to ask your advice, Mother, about a matter that just came up. It concerns Margaret."

His mother's face became radiant, for she already guessed his news. "There is a young lawyer here from Macon," went on Chrysostom. "The family is excellent and he is assured of a good future. I am sure you know Monsieur Pierre de La Farge—"

"Indeed, yes," interrupted Philiberte. "I remember him distinctly. He often visited in our home when I was growing up."

"This is the youngest son, Paul. I have known him for years. We were classmates at Cluny. He has fallen in love with Margaret and has asked my permission to seek her hand in marriage. He is a fine chap and I think he would make an excellent husband. Do you agree, Mother?"

Madame Alacoque reflected for a moment. "I trust your judgment, son, and am quite sure he is eligible. The De la Farges are good people. But have no others made any approach?"

Chrysostom laughed. "Yes, there is another. I've saved him for the last," he confessed. "It's Angelique's cousin, my best man."

Philiberte's eyes sparkled. "Guillaume de Montville," she cried softly. This was exciting news, for the handsome fair youth who had stood beside Margaret at the altar-rail would some day inherit the vast estate of Montville and the title that went with it.

Chrysostom nodded. "Naturally I would prefer him, since he is Angelique's cousin and part of the family. But Guillaume is inclined to be reckless. Nothing wrong, you understand, only he is something of a spendthrift. Otherwise he is as good as gold and regarded as a great matrimonial catch."

Philiberte was delighted. Here was her future son-in-law! After all, a spendthrift was infinitely to be preferred

to a miser. Her own dear husband was never accused of penury. "I would prefer Guillaume also," she said. "But Margaret will have her own ideas, you may be sure."

"Of course, she must make her own choice," answered Chrysostom. "The rivalry will be a spur to both suitors and one of them should be able to convince her, although she seems very much set against marrying anyone."

His mother discounted Margaret's opposition with a wave of the hand. "Young girls frequently entertain such notions but they quickly forget them after they fall in love. You'll see your sister will be no different from the rest. You may tell both young men that I am agreeable to their proposals, but that Margaret must decide between them. Why not invite both to the Mardi Gras carnival?"

"The masked ball, what a perfect setting for romance," laughed Chrysostom. "Wait until Angelique hears this," and he hurried away in the gayest of spirits after saying goodbye to his mother whose mind was already plunged in match-making.

The masked ball, held every Shrove Tuesday in the town hall of Verosvres was the outstanding festivity of the countryside and drew throngs of merry-makers from the neighboring towns and remote mountain glens. It was the one night in the year when aristocrat and peasant mingled in a carnival spirit of hilarious fun. At the stroke of twelve the music ceased and the revelers unmasked.

Chrysostom and his bride returned from their honeymoon shortly before Mardi Gras. There was a great deal of joking and laughter as the girls consulted history books and studied old sketches for attractive costumes. Madame Alacoque relived her own youth as she basted and fitted and stitched. Angelique suggested that Margaret dress as Beatrice, fancying she saw a resemblance between her sister-in-law and Dante's mystical love. For herself she chose a shepherdess costume of elaborate elegance with bouffant

The Masked Ball

satin skirts and towering white wig. Chrysostom as a court jester in cap and bells, looked the embodiment of Mardi Gras frolic, although he had violated the spirit of the carnival by revealing his sister's identity to both her professed suitors. And, of course, both youths promptly decided to array themselves as the immortal Dante.

On Mardi Gras night the town hall was packed with a shouting, laughing mob of people, all masked and costumed. Under the flaring lights, it was like watching a rainbow of color. Loud music blared incessantly. Chrysostom chuckled with secret mirth as he observed the two Dantes squirming through the mass of dancers towards Margaret. In her long, flowing white dress with jeweled girdle, she was a striking figure. The classic simplicity of her costume was emphasized by the wreath in her shining hair, which fell around her shoulders in a dark cloud. Her scarlet mask, a brilliant dash of color, only partly concealed the animation of her sparkling eyes and laughing lips. She was in her gayest mood and, unconsciously, drew the admiring glances of the men and the envious appraisal of the women.

Louder and louder twanged the guitars, faster and faster the dancers capered about in the popular gavotte of the peasantry or the minuet, a lively measure that bore little resemblance to the dignified movements of more sophisticated ballrooms. Covertly keeping an eye on his sister, Chrysostom saw her dance first with one, then with the other Dante. She showed no preference for any partner, and there were many more who pushed their way to her side. Wait, said Chrysostom to himself, when the unmasking comes it will be different. Then she will know who the Dantes are.

Chrysostom glanced at the big clock. It was past eleven and supper was being served in an adjoining room, the guests helping themselves from long serving tables set around the walls. Margaret was not on the dance floor

but the two Dantes were, and they appeared to be searching. Chrysostom smiled. Margaret must be having supper with a third admirer. So much the better; another rival would add zest to the courtship.

At last the dramatic moment—twelve o'clock, and off came the masks amidst an uproar of gleeful surprise. Chrysostom and his bride were dancing together when the hour struck. "Where is Margaret?" asked Angelique, after removing her mask. They looked around but she was nowhere to be found. And with looks of disappointment on their faces, Paul de la Farge and Guillaume de Montville joined them. A little group began forming around them. "Where is the Lady Beatrice?" they asked curiously. "Who is she?" Nobody knew anything about her except that she had suddenly disappeared without revealing her identity. Chrysostom did not wait to hear more but hastily excused himself and rushed out into the street. He had just descended the steps when the Lhautecour coachman approached him. "Are you looking for Mademoiselle Margaret? I have already driven her home, monsieur."

Chrysostom was amazed and slightly nettled. "When did she leave, Charles?"

"Quite a long time ago, monsieur," answered the man. "It is an hour or more since I returned from Lhautecour."

What a crazy thing to do, fumed Chrysostom, wondering what Angelique and her cousin and the young man from Macon would think of such odd behavior. But perhaps Margaret had not been feeling well, he decided on second thought. It would be like her to slip away quietly without causing inconvenience to others. As soon as he arrived home with Angelique, he hurried to Margaret's room and tapped gently on the closed door. There was no response and he knocked again and again. Still there came not an answering sound. Chrysostom tried the door. It was

unlocked and he stepped into the little room as noiselessly as he could, not wishing to alarm his mother who was asleep in the adjoining chamber. To his surprise and concern, he discovered that the room was quite empty. The bed, clearly outlined in the bright moonlight, had not been used.

Leaving the house by a side entrance, Chrysostom crossed the courtyard and began walking towards the big rock in the field beyond, for something told him where he would find his sister. Half way across the meadow, he saw a flutter of white. It was Margaret and she was lying at the base of the rock and sobbing bitterly. Chrysostom's heart contracted in alarm as he heard her and, running forward, he lifted her up in his arms. "Margaret, little sister, what's the matter with you? What happened? You must tell me."

For a moment she looked at him strangely, and then, recovering herself, she told him that she had had to leave the carnival; that suddenly, in the midst of the noise and music and festivity, she had seen the Suffering Lord tied to the pillar of stone and lashed with the scourge. Wherever she turned, wherever she looked, she could see only this. "I had to leave, Chrysostom," she cried. "Oh, how could I stay after that? How could I blot out the thought of all He has done for us, all His Sufferings for sinners like me who are so cold they do not even care?"

"But you are not a sinner, Margaret," said Chrysostom, speaking in a soothing tone. "You mustn't take things so seriously. Come now, it's very late and you'll catch a bad cold out here with nothing about you. Let me wrap my cloak around you. And don't cry any more."

"I'm not cold," said Margaret, and Chrysostom felt the warmth of her hand on his and saw the burning flush on her cheek. His own teeth were chattering for it was a night in early March, and winter still hung in the air. She

sighed deeply and he heard her murmur in a voice so low it was almost like an unspoken thought: "Oh, why did I ever go?"

Chrysostom hurried back to Angelique, whose curiosity was aroused by her sister-in-law's mystifying conduct. "I saw you coming in together," she whispered. "Where was she? What was wrong?"

"It was nothing at all," evaded her husband.

"But I thought she looked wild," insisted Angelique, "and her beautiful white dress was all draggled."

"Margaret is torn by opposing forces," said Chrysostom. "She has suffered a great deal and her religious views are too strict. When she enjoys herself like she did tonight, she really becomes conscience-stricken."

"How ridiculous," laughed Angelique.

Chrysostom agreed with his wife and was glad that she held such sensible views. His lovely Angelique was just the ally needed to guide his dear but queer little sister along normal, happy lines. He was quite confident that his bride, a girl of her own age, would have more influence over Margaret than either his mother or himself. It was a shock, then, to find Angelique greatly disturbed a few days later. With an air of mystery, she beckoned him into their room and told him to shut the door. Dropping her voice to a whisper, she said: "One of the maids told me something about Margaret that I could hardly believe. She said that she is sleeping on board—"

"But why should she do that?" asked Chrysostom defensively. "Besides I don't like the idea of a maid spying on Margaret and carrying such tales."

"Oh, you misunderstand, darling," exclaimed Angelique. "Juliet told no one but me and only because she was worried by what she found. There were other things—"

She hesitated and the look she cast at her husband said very plainly that she hardly knew how to express herself.

"What are you trying to say, Angelique?" asked Chrysostom quickly.

"Well, it seems that Margaret has been torturing herself—"

"Torturing herself?" gasped Chrysostom with a look of horror. "Oh, oh, this is terrible—"

"Hush," cautioned Angelique. "Don't let your mother hear. It would only worry her. I'm very, very sorry, darling, but I must tell you that Margaret wears chains under her clothes, and her arms are all scarred from the marks of them."

Chrysostom's face turned pale and he began pacing up and down the floor. After a while he said: "How much of this do you know to be true?"

"Actually, I know nothing," answered Angelique, "but I believe Juliet."

Chrysostom sat down and buried his face in his hands. When he looked up, his wife's heart was touched, for he seemed like a forlorn, unhappy little boy. "What can I do?" he asked her. "What would you do?"

Angelique ran and put her arms around him. She did not speak at once but after a while she said: "What about your uncle, the cure? He seems very practical and he does have a kind, understanding heart. Why not confide in him and let him handle Margaret? I'm sure she will be guided by his advice."

"He has already advised her to get married," answered Chrysostom with a dubious look, for he felt that good Father Antoine would hardly be equal to the situation. "A number of years ago when she was only a little girl, Margaret made a sort of vow to the Blessed Virgin—"

Angelique nodded in understanding, having heard the matter brought up before in family discussions. "I think she used to worry about it some before our brothers died," went on Chrysostom, "but after that she realized that her

first duty was to mother. At least that was what Father Antoine told her."

"But what about her vow? Did he think she should break it?"

"He assured her that under the circumstances the vow was not binding for several good reasons and she should forget all about it. He seems to think that she will be perfectly happy married to a good husband and in a home of her own but—I wonder," and Chrysostom shook his head, for his sister's excessive penances for wrongs which she had not committed impressed him as shocking and abnormal.

However he did confide in his uncle and was greatly cheered by the genial cure's wholly unexpected reaction to his tale of horror. Father Antoine threw both pudgy arms in the air and burst out laughing. "Ho, ho, what an imagination that young one has," he chortled. "She fancies herself as another Catherine of Siena or probably the new South American beata, Rose of Lima, who slept on broken tiles and wore a jagged crown around her head. This all comes from too much reading—"

"Will you please explain, Father," interrupted Chrysostom, amazed but greatly relieved by his uncle's attitude. "I'm really terribly worried and upset by Margaret's erratic behavior."

The cure folded his arms and his face assumed a more serious expression. "Do you see that book shelf, my son?" and he indicated a partly filled row on the wall. "It is half empty, is it not? Well, your pious sister has borrowed the remainder. She has been reading the lives of the saints, picking out different ones to imitate. A very laudable habit, indeed, but like everything else, it can be overdone. Margaret is at the impressionable age and she is extremely sensitive. Now do you see what I mean?"

Chrysostom's young face brightened. "Then you don't

attach any great importance to these tortures? You think it's just a temporary mood?"

"Girls of her age love to dramatize themselves and Margaret is a bit of a tragedienne," pronounced the cure. "This is a phase in her development—"

"A very unusual one, I must say, Father," broke in Chrysostom. The cure nodded. "Granted, my boy, but your sister is a very unusual girl—a very superior one, too. Everything depends now on the way she is handled."

Chrysostom was silent for a few moments. "What would you suggest, Father?" he asked earnestly.

The cure leaned forward and his small grey eyes held a confident light. "My advice to you is the same now as before. Make a suitable match for your sister. She should marry, and get her head out of the clouds. Life is real, and the sooner she has a husband and babies, the happier she will be. Margaret is a very attractive girl and bubbling over with animation in spite of her peculiarities. Surely there must be some fine young man—"

"There are any amount of them," laughed Chrysostom. "Margaret could take her pick of the most eligible swains in the countryside."

"Then see that she does," counseled his uncle, shaking a stubby finger at him.

God's Will

IX

Lhautecour is peaceful on this late afternoon in the summer of 1668. Birds whistle in the shade trees and broad shafts of sunlight fall across the green lawn in front of the terrace where Angelique and her mother-in-law are seated. The former is opening a large square envelope and Philiberte is watching with more than ordinary curiosity, for it must be important, from its many seals. A laughing shout distracts them and Jacques, now seventeen, comes bounding around the terrace. Perched on his shoulder and crowing with delight is a curly-haired baby girl. As he jumps over the terrace edge and drops into a chair, his mother holds out her arms for her grandchild. "Give me the baby,

Jacques," she scolds. "You might hurt her. Why are you so restless?"

"Nonsense, Mother, she loves it," laughs Jacques. "If you'd been cooped up in Cluny as long as I have, you'd feel like moving about."

Angelique smiles over at her brother-in-law. She likes his youthful spirits, his warm heart, and, above all, his affection for her little Claudette. The baby runs to her grandmother and climbs up into her lap. "Angelique was just going to read her letter," says Philiberte. "Perhaps it's some news from Paris."

It is a formal announcement of the betrothal of a certain Mademoiselle Marie de Bouillet de L'Alencon, younger daughter of the Count and Countess of Bienvieu, to Angelique's cousin, the fascinating young Lord of Montville whom Philiberte had favored as a very desirable son-in-law. Although it is more than two years since Guillaume proposed to her daughter and meanwhile received no encouragement from Margaret, Philiberte is nevertheless keenly disappointed and ready tears spring to her eyes. Angelique, on the contrary, receives the news of the approaching nuptials calmly.

"I am not at all surprised," she states, folding the letter. "What else could one expect? After all, Cousin Guillaume could not be expected to wait forever for Margaret to make up her mind. And you know how impossible it is to do anything with her."

"She will be an old maid," predicts Philiberte, wringing her hands.

"What about that young notary from Macon?" asks Jacques. "Perhaps Margaret prefers him."

Angelique looks up. "Paul de la Farge? Oh, he hasn't been here in months. A fine, serious young man, too, but Margaret is indifferent to him."

Philiberte sighs regretfully. "The last time I visited in

Macon my niece told me that Paul has become interested in another girl."

"I wonder how Margaret will feel when she hears this news about her old standbys?" says Jacques.

"It won't bother her," replies his mother, "for I've already told her about Paul and she was really pleased that he had found someone else. She said so quite openly."

Angelique shakes her head. "The better I know Margaret the less I understand her. She can be so gay, the life of the whole roomful. Then, suddenly, for no reason, she will drop what she's doing and walk away without a word of explanation. And no one knows what has become of her, since she'll fail to put in her appearance for the rest of the evening. It's simply incomprehensible to me."

"Where is Margaret now?" asks her brother.

"Probably in the village church saying her prayers," replies Angelique drily. "I don't have to tell you how religious she is. She spends hours on her knees before the altar, especially when she receives Holy Communion." Jacques leans forward and looked intently at his mother and Angelique. "Does it not occur to you," he asks with the air of one who has made a great discovery, "that Margaret may have a vocation to the religious life? It seems quite obvious to me."

Poor Jacques, with the thoughtlessness of youth has made the very worst suggestion and his mother begins to weep copiously. Genuinely distressed, he tries to comfort her. "I'm sorry, Mother, if I said the wrong thing, but since she has such a dislike for the married state, I thought you would rather have her a nun—"

"Anything but that," groans Philiberte. "It would kill me to part with her as I have reminded her many times. And besides she is not suited to the life at all. No one understands Margaret as I do and I know she would be wretched in the convent."

Angelique agrees emphatically with her mother-in-law. "You are well fitted for the religious life, Jacques, because you have a practical, commonsense way. When you are a priest, people will like you, but I feel sure the nuns would want Margaret to go home in a week." Jacques is puzzled but asks no more questions, for his main concern now is to soothe his mother's feelings and dispel the domestic storm he has unwittingly aroused. Yet his sympathy goes out to his sister and he wonders if perhaps, young as he is, he cannot help her, get her to confide in him. For Jacques is warm-hearted, capable of great feeling and has inherited his father's generosity of nature, his fine disregard for worldly gain and in Margaret he recognizes a kinship of the soul.

* * * *

As soon as he could, Jacques slipped away from the terrace in search of his sister, and, expecting to find her at the parish church, started across the open fields towards Verosvres. Approaching the great granite rock where all the Alacoque children had played, Jacques suddenly saw Margaret. She was kneeling in prayer on top of the rock and the soft, unconscious expression of her face gave it a seraphic beauty. Breathlessly he watched, for never had he seen anyone so devoid of movement. She was like a statue, her lips motionless, her eyes raised to the broad arch of the sky. Jacques could feel that some invisible force was reaching down into his sister's soul and believing that it would be wrong to arouse her, turned quietly away.

He had gone only a few steps when he heard her calling to him and, looking around, saw her smiling and beckoning. He ran back and climbed to the broad, flat top of the rock.

"Oh, Jacques," said Margaret, "you are the very person I want to talk to. I have had a great visioning and now I am at peace. You must have experienced this feeling when you

reached your decision to become a priest, did you not?"

"I always wanted to be a priest, even when I was a little chap serving Father Antoine's Mass," answered Jacques with a reminiscent smile. "I used to make paper vestments and pretend that I was the cure and say Mass with a big old tumbler for a chalice. I can't even remember exactly when I made my decision."

"Then you have never known what it is to be torn between the love of worldly pleasures and the call of the spirit," said Margaret wonderingly. "For a long time I have been at war with myself but now, at last, I am free."

She fell into a silent reverie and Jacques waited, not knowing what to say and realizing that his sister was on the point of unburdening her soul. "After Chrysostom married," she began, "we became very gay again at Lhautecour. They entertain a great deal and are entertained at the neighboring manors. And of course, I am always included. That attracts a lot of company which I have to see. So I dress up and try to enjoy myself as much as possible but in the middle of society and amusements I feel drawn away, as if strong ropes were pulling me and at last I am forced to follow Him Who calls me."

His sister's low voice sank into silence and, keenly aware of the trancelike exaltation of her mood, Jacques was silent, too. He could understand her seeming contradictions, which were so baffling to others. And perhaps had he known of her excessive penances, so horrifying to his older brother, young Jacques might have understood, too, and condoned. But of these she did not speak.

"It is very difficult for me to put into words," went on Margaret with a little gesture of hesitancy, "but this morning after I received Holy Communion, it seemed to me that my dear Lord reminded me that I was vowed to Him since earliest infancy . . . and then He imprinted such interior peace in me, and my soul found itself in such calm that I

resolved to die rather than change. All day long this wonderful new sense of tranquillity has remained with me and now, kneeling here, I have made a solemn promise to renounce all earthly pleasures. I am no longer subject to vanity. My spirit is free and I am happier than I have ever been before, dear Jacques."

"Does this mean that you have made up your mind to enter the convent?" asked her brother.

Margaret sighed and shook her head. "I am afraid that would be impossible, since mother will not consent and tells me it will kill her, if I leave her. Father Antoine, too, says that my duty is to remain in the world. So remain I shall, to please them, but on my own terms." And Jacques saw a flash of determination in her deep-set eyes. "Never again shall I consider marrying anyone, for I shall live the life of a religious. From this day forward I dedicate myself to the service of God and my neighbor. And I take the holy vows of chastity and poverty."

Jacques was impressed but dubious. "To live in this world but not of it will be very difficult," he warned, "but it is a noble experiment."

He did not mention Angelique's announcement of her cousin's engagement, for that seemed wholly incongruous now. He was convinced that Margaret would never marry, no matter what pressure might be brought to bear by the members of her family. He was thankful that she did not know that only a few days ago, he himself had actually offered half of his inheritance to Chrysostom to add to their sister's already substantial dowry if it would help to find her a husband. Jacques' face turned red with shame as he thought of it. How could he—how could all of them—be so blind, so crass!

After that Margaret knew she had an ally in her younger brother, and when his vacation was over and the goodbyes were being said, Jacques drew her away from the rest.

"Behold This Heart"

"I shall pray for your success and happiness," he promised her.

Another year at Cluny passed slowly by, enlivened for the young scholastic by news from home. His mother wrote in January that Angelique had given birth to a second daughter, whom they were going to call Huguette after Angelique's departed mother. In the spring Margaret wrote enthusiastically of a school she was opening at Lhautecour for the poor children of the countryside. "They have no one to teach them and run about like little savages. Do you remember the big rustic summerhouse in the chestnut grove? That's my class room. I have started with the catechism, but there is much room for general improvement and I have to stop quite often to give lessons in cleanliness and deportment. Some of my little wild men have to be bribed before they will attend."

Later she wrote that they were going to have Confirmation at Verosvres and their uncle, the cure was in a great state of excitement, preparing for the episcopal visitation. The old stone church was being repaired and the interior refinished. There was a large class of candidates, adults as well as children, for it was many years since the Sacrament had been administered in the parish. Father Antoine was being assisted with the instructions by two catechists whom the Bishop had sent ahead. Margaret was among the candidates as were several of her pupils. She added, with simple pride, that she had been commended for her catechetical work with the youngsters. Also, she had chosen Mary for her Confirmation name.

A few weeks after the Confirmation, Jacques returned to Lhautecour for a brief summer vacation. He was deeply happy to be home again and, during the first days of reunion with his family, saw only joy and contentment there. Baby Huguette, looking like a little angel with her halo of golden curls, was the center of affectionate interest;

Angelique was more preoccupied than ever with husband and children and the countless details of home management; his mother doted upon her grandchildren and never wearied of giving Angelique the benefit of her material experience and wisdom; Chrysostom, now 24, was making a name for himself in his profession and managing the estate with equal success. His young brother thought he had never seen him looking so handsome, so self-confident and capable. And Margaret? Jacques found her even more active than Chrysostom, for she followed a rule of life that kept her usefully occupied every moment of her waking hours. Long before the rest of the family, she was up and at prayer. She attended Mass every morning at the parish church, walking back and forth. Her school, her visits to the sick, her cheerful devotion to the needy left her no idle moments. If happiness resides in selflessness, reflected Jacques, then Margaret should be extremely happy.

To his unaccustomed eyes Lhautecour presented a bright and beautiful scene, yet it was only a short while before he sensed an undercurrent of gnawing discontent and jarring strife. His mother confided to him how bitterly disappointed she was over Margaret's refusal to marry and have her own home. Chrysostom and Angelique agreed with her, and frankly expressed their annoyance over Margaret's mode of life. "Her heart is as big as one of our mountains," said his brother ruefully, "but you have no idea how provoking she can be."

"And those unspeakable little brats that she wastes her time on," pouted Angelique. "It is really embarrassing when callers come and find her dressed like the village school-marm, surrounded by a band of filthy ragamuffins."

"Oh, come now," defended Jacques. "I visited Margaret's rustic school only a short while ago, and I was impressed by the wonderful work she is doing with those youngsters. They looked clean and tidy and were well behaved. I think

Margaret is more like a real saint than anyone I have ever known."

"Saints are hard to live with," answered Angelique disapprovingly. "There are so many matters of vital importance to normal individuals which they completely ignore—such as social position, for example."

An anxious frown gathered between Chrysostom's eyes. He was extremely fond of his sister, who had been his dearest playmate when they were young, and he was an adoring husband, whose admiring affection for his wife had increased with the years. Angelique was a member of the nobility, with a cold hauteur in her makeup that was entirely lacking in the Alacoques. It gave her husband an uneasy feeling and increased the growing tension between his wife and his sister. Jacques realized his brother's position, yet his heart went out to Margaret. Poor girl, she was having a difficult time of it, trying to live like a nun while remaining in the world.

One day, shortly before his return to Cluny, Jacques asked her if she still wanted to be a nun and was amazed at the vehemence with which she assured him that she "would rather die than change." But later, when he saw his mother and Margaret together and noted the gentleness of Margaret's manner, the way their mother's face lit up when she looked at her, Jacques could understand the family attitude towards her vocation. Was his mother right, after all, in maintaining that she knew her daughter better than she knew herself? That Margaret would be heartbroken separated from her?

It was a baffling situation and time, the universal interpreter, offered no solution, for when Jacques returned home after another year he found conditions much worse. His mother's eyes were swollen from weeping and his sister's lips had a tragic droop. Madame Alacoque no longer importuned her to marry, but she complained to the other

members of the family, to Father Antoine and their friends. Margaret was twenty-three now, and doomed by her own stubborn actions to spinsterhood. Her mother was miserable, and making everybody else miserable around her. She had aged fast during the past twelve months, Jacques noticed, and his heart contracted in loving anxiety as he looked at her white hair and the fragility of her appearance. Yet she was only fifty-eight.

There was a decided change in his sister, too, which the other members of the family who were constantly with her failed to observe but which was quite evident to the young seminarian. Margaret had lost her earlier enthusiasm and seemed depressed, almost despairing. One day he drew her aside and whispered: "Margaret, you are unhappy. Tell me what's wrong?" She pressed his hand and said nothing but tears sprang to her eyes. Jacques soon learned the cause of her secret grief: she was finding out by bitter experience that one cannot live the life of a religious in the home surrounded by one's family.

Bit by bit, Jacques heard the series of incidents that added up to the failure of Margaret's noble experiment. First there was the abandonment of her school. Chrysostom told him about that. "It was tolerable when the weather was warm and she taught them out in the open but when it turned cold in autumn and Margaret brought them indoors, the situation became impossible. Angelique couldn't stand all that bedlam, didn't want our little girls to be contaminated by the young ruffians and, honestly, I couldn't blame her. She was used to a higher scale of living before she married me and came to this old farmstead."

Then came his mother's resentment of Margaret's works of mercy, which she had redoubled after giving up the children. She had gone into the homes of the poor villagers, tended the sick, dressed sores and performed veritable miracles of nursing. The needy and suffering blessed her,

and her fame spread as a wonder worker of healing. But her mother's objections were a grave hindrance, and Jacques could see that Margaret would have to renounce this project for the sake of peace and harmony. "She is killing herself and neglecting me," moaned Madame Alacoque. "Look at her, she is skin and bone, for she neither sleeps nor eats. She will break down from overwork and how any girl as finicky as Margaret can do the things she does for those revolting patients, is more than I can see."

And Angelique had her indictment to add. "It is positively embarrassing the way Margaret acts and people are beginning to say she is a crank. Heaven only knows what she will be like when she is older, judging from her freakish behavior now. She never goes to any social events, not even when we entertain at home. She spends hours in church and is excessively pious. Why, even Father Antoine admits that she overdoes it. Every sou of her allowance is given away, mostly to lazy beggars of the most worthless kind and she is constantly asking Chrysostom or her mother for money for some charity or another. Imagine my feelings when she stalked into the drawing room one afternoon when I was entertaining at cards, dressed in the most severe style, and started taking up a collection for the poor. Oh, it's unbearable!"

Jacques listened with grave misgivings. What would Margaret do when the time came, as it inevitably would, when she must abandon all her efforts in order to conform to the wishes of her relatives? What did the future hold for her? He was not surprised to receive a letter from her, shortly after his return to the seminary, in which she told him that she was going to visit their cousins, the Lamyns, in Macon. It was Angelique's idea that she should go alone, as "a complete change would do her good." Jacques put down the letter. He could picture his sister, a pathetic figure, departing for Macon. It was not until

several weeks later, that he learned the disastrous outcome of the visit, for their mother had been stricken with a severe heart attack and kept calling for her daughter. In desperate haste Chrysostom had rushed to Macon. Here, to his annoyance, he had found Margaret was not at their cousin's home, but visiting the Ursuline nuns. Worried by their mother's condition, Chrysostom had lost control and angrily reproached her. "You are a very selfish girl, Margaret. Look at poor mother. If you don't give up your queer behavior you will kill her. Do you want that on your saintly soul?"

Margaret had bowed her head in conscience-stricken grief. All her hopes for being a religious had faded, all her efforts to live like a nun while remaining at home had failed. She had reached the end. Perhaps her mother might die. Trembling, she had crept into the carriage for the journey home. Her brother had sat silently by her side, his silence a mute rebuke.

Madame Alacoque did not die but showed a remarkable improvement as soon as Margaret returned. "You see how mother depends on you," said Chrysostom. "You must never, never leave her." It was obvious that her brother was correct. Farewell forever now to her vanishing dream of the Sisterhood. Every hope was renounced. She was beaten. . . .

The following January, Chrysostom and Angelique celebrated their fifth wedding anniversary. It fell on a bright, beautiful Sunday, and as the Alacoques sat in their family pew in the parish church, the young master of Lhautecour looked supremely happy. He paid scant attention to Father Antoine when he read in Latin from a large scroll, and was only mildly interested when the cure began translating into French. According to this document, the recently-elected Pope, Clement X, had proclaimed a Jubilee Year, and missionaries were being sent into all parts of Christendom to

preach the Jubilee and to hear general confessions so that all the faithful might gain the plenary indulgence. "Here in Verosvres," announced the cure, "we shall have our missionary, who will arrive next Sunday. It will be a fine opportunity for everyone to make a new start for the good of his soul."

Later, when the family had returned from church and were at dinner, Chrysostom added another bit of news about the Jubilee. "The missionary is a very holy man, a Franciscan, Father Hugo. He will visit different homes during his stay at Verosvres and Father Antoine says that we can expect him to spend at least one night at Lhaute-cour."

Chrysostom noticed the joyful expression on Margaret's face, and it made him happy. Poor girl, her life was pitiful, although it was her own doing. This wise and humble priest would give her good advice and consolation. The entire household would be blessed by his presence. He thought of his father and Jean and Philibert and the indulgences to be gained for their souls.

The missionary arrived, a sturdily built man with a long, greying beard. In his brown robe and cowl he was not unlike the figure of a saint in a picture. Chrysostom was attracted to him from the moment he set foot on Lhaute-cour. His very presence shed a benediction on the old stone house.

The confessions were heard, the indulgences granted; a holy peace rested on the household. As Chrysostom prepared to accompany his guest to Verosvres in the carriage, the Franciscan paused. "I would like a few words with you, your good mother and your wife," he stated simply.

"Of course, Father; I shall send for them. They will be here in a few moments." Chrysostom was greatly pleased at Father Hugo's wish, thinking that perhaps some special indulgence was going to be granted. He was a little surprised

that the invitation did not include Margaret. Smiling, he escorted his mother and Angelique to the room where the Franciscan was waiting.

Father Hugo looked gravely into their faces. As he spoke his words were soft and low but penetrated to their hearts. "Here in this home," he began, "you have one who has been called by the Lord. When God calls, we must obey. This soul is destined by its Creator for the cloister and it is wrong to hold it back. Not even a mother's love can stop the will of God. If God asks that mother to make a sacrifice it must be made. It does not matter what we think is best, we must seek to obey His holy will."

Chrysostom looked at his mother, whose eyes were filled with tears. But they were tears of renunciation and in his wife's expression he read docile agreement. In his own heart, too, he knew that he must agree with Father Hugo. "We have all been wrong," he admitted to himself. "May God forgive us."

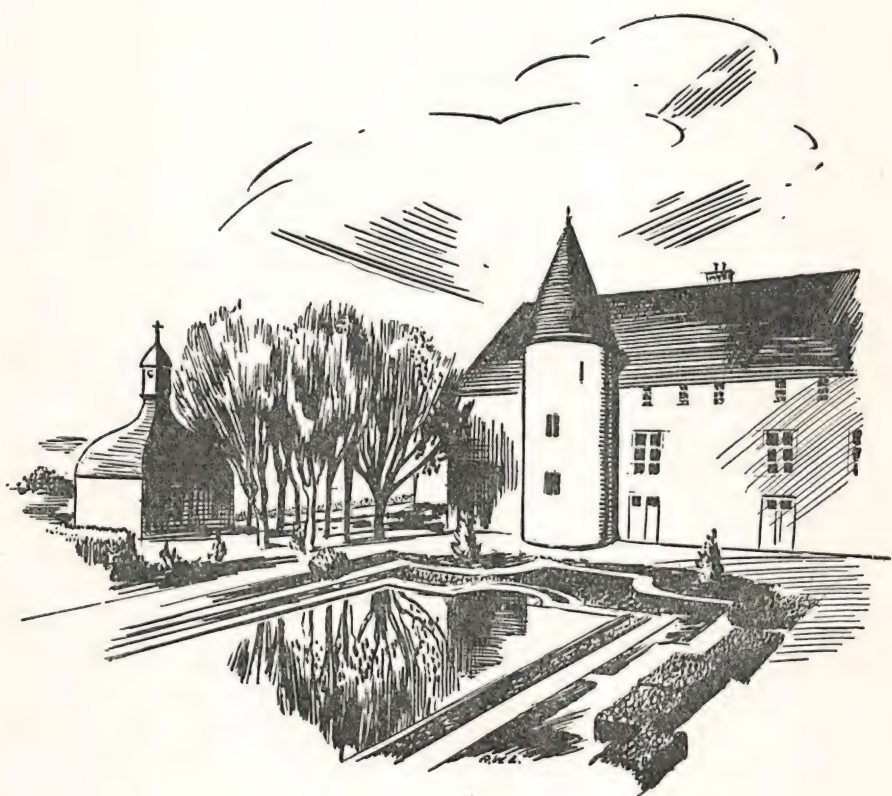
"You are right, Father Hugo," he said. "I shall speak to my sister immediately."

"Thank you, my son," said the missionary.

Chrysostom hunted through the house for Margaret but could not find her. "I wonder," he suddenly thought, "if she could be at the old, tree-shaded rock in the valley where we used to play as children."

The sun had already dipped behind the great hills when he reached the rock, its last fading rays shining on Margaret. She was on her knees, looking towards the cross on the church at Verosvres as she did long ago, and there was a smile on her face.

Celestial Fire



Paray-le-Monial

X

In the Visitation Convent of Paray-le-Monial night prayers were over; the community had settled to the *grande silence* which would remain unbroken until after breakfast next morning. The cloister lay profoundly still in the light of a soft, wan moon. It shone through Margaret Mary's window on the whitewashed walls and curtained bed, making each simply object luminous—the holy water stoup on the wall, the metal lantern on the small table, and the tall black wooden cross beside it, on which the ivory figure of the Crucified was clearly outlined. The brick floor was bare and rough as suited the ascetical atmosphere of the narrow cell. How different from her old room at Lhautecour!

Sleep did not come to Margaret Mary, for a strong emo-

tion held her mind, the conviction that God had brought her in His mysterious way to Paray-le-Monial and peace—blessed peace for which she had so desperately longed. No longer was she perpetually held back by her surroundings; here in these quiet walls her soul took wings and soared into heights of supernatural grace. Though the days, from early meditation to night prayers, were occupied in full, though her tasks were menial as befitted a new arrival in the Sisterhood, they were all calculated to elevate the spirit and unite it with God. Dear St. Francis and the holy Jeanne de Chantal had wisely made the rules, which if faithfully kept, meant perfection. And that was what was desired more than anything else, for perfection meant the ability to rise above the natural and see God more clearly.

A cloud bank obscured the moon and the cell darkened; the figure of the Christ seemed to vanish, only a faint gleam showed. That was the way it was in the distracting world, one could see only a glimmer of the supernatural. Here in the cloister vision must intensify and God come closer to the eager soul. In tranquillity and recollection she would pass her life at Paray-le-Monial. It was a very satisfying realization.

To acquire the conventual routine had taken only a few days. One lived by the bells; every hour, every minute, had its special duty performed in an atmosphere of holiness. Thus day by day was the perfect religious formed, pleasing in the eyes of the Creator. And day by day the holy rule was presented as the road to salvation and unity with God. The rule, the rule, nothing else mattered. Keep the rule and one followed the way which led up the rugged heights attained by the founders. This was the great lesson, ever new and ever old. Knowing this all-embracing truth, one could not go wrong nor deceive one's self. Obedience was the firm and solid foundation upon which the pattern was made.

Margaret Mary sat up in bed, startled by a flash of memory. "I'm breaking the rule now. Mother Thouvant, the mistress of novices, told us to keep our minds on the meditation for the morning. Dear me, I almost forgot it—self-deception."

She was slightly distressed and confused. Here she had been enjoying herself with thoughts of complacency when she should have placed before her mind the topic for meditation and calmly slipped off into slumber. At this very moment was she not deceiving herself? How very difficult it was to look judicially into one's own heart, to see one's self in the light of reality. She remembered that Father Antoine used to observe drolly that "even a monkey likes his own face." Dear Uncle Antoine! She wondered how he was getting along and how her dear mother and brothers were. Her mind strayed away, she was back in her home at Lhautecour.

A faint tap, almost like a gentle scraping, aroused her suddenly. Was it the novice mistress coming to upbraid her for such distractions? But that was absurd. What, then, could it be? Her guilty conscience or only her imagination? But the sound increased and Margaret Mary hurried to the door. In the dim light stood Anne Rosselin, the youngest postulant, an angelic-looking little creature of fifteen. Her face was tear-stained and her large blue eyes wide with terror. "Please let me stay with you," she whispered, "I'm so frightened and lonely."

Margaret Mary swung wide the door and, putting her arm around the trembling girl, led her into the room. "What's the matter, little one?" she asked. "Are you homesick?"

"Oh, no," answered Anne, who came of a family that had been connected with the convent since its foundation, almost half a century earlier. "I have had a terrible nightmare. I dreamed I was in the depths of hell and such a

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strange, fearful hell! It was a place of ice. When I woke up I was freezing."

"It was only a bad dream, dear," said Margaret soothingly. "There is nothing to be afraid of. Come, sit here on the bed."

"It was more than a dream," sobbed Anne. "I am a great sinner and I must have been in hell when someone prayed me out."

"You are not a sinner but a little innocent whom the good God loves dearly," smiled Margaret Mary with an elder-sisterly air. "You are not fully awake yet, that is all. You are safe here with me."

"Don't let me go," said the little postulant, clinging tightly to this comforting older girl. "I might fall back into that dreadful bottomless pit of ice with such queer monsters, frozen in every limb."

"I won't let you fall, dear child. Take courage. Look at this crucifix on the table. That white gleaming in the dark is the figure of Christ. Nothing can hurt you when you look at Him. Did He not say 'fear not' to His frightened Apostles when they were stricken with terror?"

"Oh, yes, yes. I am so glad I came here. I feel much better." The girl had ceased her trembling and Margaret Mary could feel her small body growing warm and relaxed. She gently stroked the pallid face. "It is so easy to deceive one's self, as Mother Thouvant explained."

Anne's face brightened. "I see now what she meant when she was telling us tonight about the meditation on self-deception, for I really thought I was in hell."

"You were greatly deceived," Margaret Mary assured her, "but worry no more."

She walked back with Anne to her cell, gave her a kindly pat on the shoulder and silently turned back. A shadow detached itself from the darkness and suddenly, there stood the mistress of novices. The postulant opened her lips to

explain but Mother Thouvant halted her with an expressive gesture, placing her fingers across her lips. Her eyes were severe as she pointed towards the door of Margaret Mary's room. What must she think? What could she think, except that Margaret Mary had broken the holy rule in a flagrant manner by stealing out of her room to visit another postulant at this late hour? If only the novice mistress had permitted her to say a word for herself but Margaret Mary realized that despite the irregular offense Mother Thouvant would not break the rule of silence. Only a few days before she had explained the great silence and quoted from the Scriptures how Christ had come in the stillness of the midnight hour to a poor stable to redeem all men.

Margaret Mary was utterly miserable as she crawled into bed. Tomorrow she would be sent back into the world, and poor little Anne might be dismissed as well. That thought wrenched her affectionate heart. The hours passed; dawn stole through the window, and still she could not sleep. At last came the excitator's knock on her door and the customary salutation, "Vive, Jesu." Automatically she made answer: "Et Marie."

She could hear the sounds of her companions as they dressed for the hour of mental prayer. How would she be able to drag herself through the routine of devotions, her spirit awaiting in deep sorrow the blow of dismissal. And Anne! What could she do to help her?

The novices entered the big room and before taking their places, knelt to kiss the floor as an act of humiliation. After the preliminary prayer, Mother Thouvant seated herself at her desk and announced the first point of meditation. The youthful aspirants to the religious life closed their eyes and tried to concentrate on self-deception but Margaret Mary could not keep her mind on the meditation. The memory of the frightened, shaking girl knocking on her door last night disturbed her.

Suddenly Mother Thouvant spoke, her flat, toneless words breaking the deep quiet. "The postulant Margaret Mary Alacoque will rise and tell us what passes in her mind."

For a moment Margaret Mary was bewildered, and then obediently arose. She must speak the truth, for that was her nature and no religious training was needed to impart candor to this young woman. She had a simplicity which was evangelical in character.

"I was thinking of hell, Mother," she said, "a hell of ice where all the souls were frozen."

An uncontrollable giggle escaped from the tall, slender novice, Francoise du Challoux, who was seated behind Margaret Mary. What a silly thing—a hell of ice. She exchanged glances with Anne Piedenuz, the fourth member of the novitiate who was trying unsuccessfully to stifle her laughter. Hell was a place of flames and this odd person was telling them it was a frozen abode. Despite their efforts at restraint, their nervous mirth increased.

"That will be sufficient, Margaret Mary Alacoque," pronounced the mistress of novices. Her words were cold and measured. Then, arising in her place, she sternly asked: "Do you not realize that you are in the presence of God? For shame!"

The rebuke put a stop to the hysterical giggles, but a sense of distraction hampered the consideration of the second and third points of the formal meditation. Margaret Mary sat with her head bowed in profound dejection, convinced that all possible hope of reprieve was gone. She had angered the novice mistress and caused unseemly mirth in this house of prayer. But perhaps Mother Thouvant would be less inclined now to deal harshly with poor little Anne Rosselin.

And now it was time to repair to the chapel. The candles were lit, matching the sunbeams playing through the win-

dows. As Margaret Mary took her place in the Divine Presence a strange peace supplanted her troubled confusion of spirit. Forgotten her concern over last night's grievous misunderstanding, forgotten the ridiculous but serious incident of the meditation, forgotten even her doleful surmisings.

How small, how petty her difficulty as the sublime tragedy of the Mass unfolded before her. Everything about her vanished, she was no longer surrounded by religious, she had entered another world. In the feeble figures of bread and wine dwelt the Saviour Himself. He was offering Himself again to His Heavenly Father as He had on that first Calvary.

The mystic words of consecration! Jesus is there on the altar, obedient to the wish of that Jesuit Father celebrating the Holy Mysteries. Incomprehensible love, divine plan! The Host is broken as His body was pierced on the tree of Golgotha. The Heart of Love oozes forth its last few drops. Nothing matters only the love of this greatest of lovers. Down through the corridors of time the Mass continues, down, down until the end of days; back through the long reaches of the ages, back to the Last Supper goes the solemn and celestial rite, the Unbloody Calvary. . . .

When Mass was over and the nuns left their stalls, one figure remained motionless. It was Margaret Mary, her hands folded across her breast, her eyes wide open and staring blankly. Moments slipped by, the silence softly punctuated by the distant ringing of bells, the rustling movements of the nuns going about their familiar routine, the laughter and noise of the academy pupils coming to school. But the kneeling postulant heard nothing for a veil had fallen between her and the tangible world.

Then someone was calling her name, shaking her and arousing with an effort, she saw Anne Rosselin bending anxiously over her. "Margaret Mary, dear Margaret Mary,

why are you here? Breakfast is over and you were missed from the table."

Without speaking, the older postulant followed her into the corridor. "When I am in the chapel I forget everything else," she confided. "Oh, you cannot realize, little friend, what it means to me to live under the same roof with Our Dear Lord, for you have always been near Him. But I used to live miles from the nearest church and there were long years when I could only go on Sundays." A look of great sadness descended on Margaret Mary's face and her lips trembled as she went on: "And now I must go back."

"No, no," interrupted Anne eagerly. "That is what I came to tell you about. I have just been to Mother Thouvant and told her about last night. She sent me for you, and I am sure she is not displeased with you now that she knows it was all my fault."

At the invitation of the novice mistress, Margaret Mary sat down. "You have been here only a few weeks, Postulant Alacoque," she began in kindly tones, though her face was unsmiling and her eyes keen as they searched the countenance of the young woman opposite her. "You have much to learn but, as you are several years older than the other novices, you should adapt yourself more readily to convent life. Postulant Rosselin has given me an explanation of what happened last night which absolves you from blame. The fault was hers but excusable in one so young and inexperienced. You broke the rule of silence to obey a greater one—the law of charity, on which our holy founders, St. Francis de Sales and the blessed Jeanne de Chantal, established the Visitation Order. Your action, under the circumstances, was commendable and quite in keeping with their teaching to do the Divine Will with the greatest possible love."

The venerable nun, who had been forty-four years in the convent, and four times mother superior paused while

Margaret Mary waited in silent content. It was good to know that she was not going to be dismissed from dear Paray-le-Monial with its opportunities for being so close to her Divine Master, that little Anne was safe. The world was taking on a bright aspect after the dark hours of last night and early morning. The birds singing in the nut grove thickets seemed to be caroling just for her, a gay chanson.

"However," went on Mother Thouvant, "to be unduly concerned over any individual is not charity but a form of self-love. Tell me, my daughter, do you not feel strongly attracted to Postulant Rosselin?"

"Yes, Reverend Mother," answered Margaret Mary. "The moment I saw her, I was drawn to her and felt that we were kindred spirits."

"Then it was not at all distasteful to you to comfort her in her childish distress?" pursued the novice mistress.

"Oh, no, Reverend Mother, it was a pleasure," exclaimed Margaret Mary.

"Exactly, my daughter, and such being the case, not meritorious to the same degree as a good deed performed against your own desires. Be on your guard against the danger of particular friendship. Root out this feeling from your heart before it has time to develop."

Margaret Mary looked surprised and dismayed. "She seems like a little sister to me, Reverend Mother," she pleaded. "I have never known what it is to have a sister—both of mine died when they were babies, but I have always—"

The novice mistress interrupted with an expressive gesture. "And was it to form ties of human affection that you came to the convent, Postulant Alacoque?" she inquired ironically. "Did you give up your mother, your family and home, everyone and everything most dear to you, only to become absorbed in fresh attachments?"

"Indeed no, Reverend Mother. I wished to be a nun

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for the love of God alone, to leave the world utterly, to forget and be forgotten. That is why I came to the Saintes-Maries, far from home where I had neither relative nor friend."

Mother Thouvant was amazed by the passionate earnestness of the young woman's words, which pleased her more than her outward demeanor revealed. Already her penetrating judgment had recognized in this unusual personality a great genius for sanctity. In warmer tones she explained: "Do not fear, my daughter, that the more we love our God, the more we strangle and kill our natural affection, for nothing could be more contradictory. No, the love of God sublimates human love and friendship, transfiguring and glorifying it. One does not rebuild worldly ties in the cloister, rather one's heart goes out to all in Christ. Personal likes and dislikes must be conquered, one must learn to show affection to those who are repugnant."

Silently Margaret Mary recalled her coming to the Visitation. The family after consenting at last to renounce her, had urged her to enter the Ursuline Convent at Macon. It would be close to home and one of her Macon cousins had entered there. But Margaret Mary had persuaded Chrysostom, very much against his own wishes, to take her to this distant place which neither of them knew. There had been fresh difficulties on the way, too, for they had stopped at the Urbanist Convent in Charolles, and when her former teachers learned that she was going to become a nun, they had warmly invited her to remain with them.

But an inner voice had warned her and they had journeyed several miles until they reached this obscure place in the Charolais Valley and the convent of the Holy Marys, as the Visitation nuns were called. No sooner had she crossed the enclosure, than Margaret Mary was transported with joy, for she knew that it was here God wished her to be. At once she felt stamped on her spirit that this was a

holy place, that this name of Sainte-Marie meant what she must be at all costs.

The voice of the novice mistress abruptly shattered her reverie. "One more matter. You absented yourself from breakfast this morning. Were you ill, my daughter?"

"No, Reverend Mother, I forgot all about it."

Mother Thouvant's brows went up. "Are you in the habit of forgetting your breakfast?" she drily inquired.

"Yes, Reverend Mother—that is, no, Reverend Mother," said Margaret Mary in some confusion. "I mean that when I am at Holy Mass I forget everything else and sometimes breakfast is over before I leave the chapel."

"I have already observed this tendency in you," stated the mistress of novices, shaking her head in disapproval. "It must be corrected at once. The Visitation is not a contemplative Order, and excesses of this type are forbidden. Moderate your devotions and discipline your mind. Follow the rule exactly and perform each duty in its proper order."

"Yes, Reverend Mother," promised the postulant earnestly. "I shall try my best to do as you say."

"You may go now and get your breakfast," concluded Mother Thouvant. "I shall ask Our Blessed Mother to help you to overcome these obstacles to your progress."

The time for receiving the veil and becoming a novice drew near for Margaret Mary. At last the great day, August 25, 1671, the feast of St. Louis, arrived. Although there was only one other candidate, Anne Rosselin, a large number of Paray citizens were present in the chapel, for the Rosselin family was one of the most prominent in the city and six of its members had entered the Visitation convent since it was founded in 1626. The Alacoque family was also represented. Margaret Mary's mother, her brother Chrysostom, Father Antoine, and relatives and friends from Macon and Verosvres attended the solemn service.

At the Gospel side of the chancel the venerable Bishop

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of Autun sat on an improvised throne encircled by his attendants, officials of the Mass and visiting clergy. The altar candles gleamed amidst the beauty of flowers and now the organ played a hushed prelude as the candidates entered. Glances of admiration followed the two figures in their bridal gowns of white satin with long trains and veils of exquisite lace crowned with orange blossoms, the one tall and slender and dark, a mature young woman of marked dignity and noble beauty; the other small and fair with golden curls and the face of angelic childhood.

Madame Alacoque leaned from the end of the pew and gently touched the edge of her daughter's flowing veil. Could this be her own flesh and blood, the daughter who had suffered so much in the world, now to be consecrated to God? How compelling had been that great urge in Margaret to attain the supreme desire of her heart, to conquer over all obstacles.

Philiberte was abashed as she reflected that her own selfish wilfulness had been one of the major obstacles. She was happy today because her child was happy. Besides, another grandchild had come to fill the empty place in her heart since Margaret had gone away: Angelique had given birth to a third daughter only a week ago, which was the reason why she was not present today. Philiberte was experiencing a second blooming of motherhood in Chrysostom's family and her life at Lhautecour was full.

She glanced at her fine son sitting beside her, his handsome features glowing in the light which came through the stained glass windows. And poor old Father Antoine, his head was nodding the moment after his niece passed by. It had been a rugged journey through the mountains from the parish church at Verosvres and he was very tired.

When the Offertory of the Mass was reached, there was a pause in the sacred ritual while Margaret Mary and Anne knelt at the altar rail. The Bishop cut a few strands

of hair from their heads in the form of a cross and presented them with their habits. The service was simple but deeply impressive. From henceforth they would have for their sole interest the service of the Divine Master.

After the Mass, the convent parlor was the scene of much joyful greeting. Relatives and friends awaited with keen interest the appearance of the new novices. At last the moment arrived. But what a change from the bridal garments! Madame Alacoque was a trifle dismayed as she saw her daughter in a voluminous gown of coarse black wool with a long dangling rosary attached to a leather girdle. Under the white linen veil of the novitiate her forehead was bound with a severe linen bandeau and her neck and shoulders covered with a stiff white gimp.

"Now you are a real sister, my child," she said.

Sister Margaret Mary smiled fondly as she embraced her mother tenderly. "All the better to pray for you, Mother dear. We are closer today than ever in God."

What spiritual depths in his sister, thought Chrysostom. We never fully appreciated her. Father Antoine caught the look in his nephew's face and understood his thoughts. "Margaret will be a professed nun before we know it," he said. "Time goes quickly and the year will soon pass."

"And in a few more years Jacques will be ordained," added Chrysostom. "Then we shall have a priest and a nun in the family. Aren't you proud of them, Mother?"

"Yes, indeed I am," said Madame Alacoque with a smile that was all happiness. "God has blessed us."

"As He always does when we try to do His holy will," murmured Sister Margaret Mary, her eyes radiant with joy. "Pray for me, Mother, and you, too, Father Antoine and Chrysostom, that I may prove myself worthy during this year of my novitiate to be professed."

"I'll say a prayer to Our Blessed Mother every day," promised Philiberte, "just as I used to do when you were

so sick and she made you well again. Do you remember?"

"How could I ever forget?" answered the novice. "I promised her then that I would be her daughter and I know she wants me to be one of the Saintes-Maries. The moment I came here something told me that."

"Then a Sainte-Marie you will surely be," rhymed Father Antoine with a chuckle. "Some day you will be the mother superior. May I live to see it."

Sister Margaret Mary joined in the laughter. Dear Uncle Antoine was as irrepressible as ever. "Heaven forbid that such as I should be chosen for that station," she exclaimed. "If only I make my profession that's all I ask."

"Spoken with the humility of a most worthy novice," said Chrysostom, looking fondly down at the black robed figure. "My dear sister, the Visitation Convent never had a better subject for the novitiate than yourself."

His remark, half jest, half earnest, was overheard by Mother Thouvant, who was seated in a nearby group, and her inscrutable old eyes rested for a moment on the new novice. A strange, powerful character endowed with rare virtues and sanctity. But was she suitable for the Visitation Order? The mistress of novices had her doubts.

The Novice

XI

"*Where is Sister Margaret Mary?*" inquired Mother Thou-vant, walking into the community room of the novitiate one November afternoon during the recreation hour and noticing with annoyance that only three of her four charges were present. What a difficult novice, always requiring vigilant observation. There were times when the task of moulding her to the regulated life of the convent seemed hopeless. Yet Sister Alacoque never defied a single rule, she simply forgot about them.

"Reverend Mother, I think she is in the filbert grove," answered Sister Anne Rosselin. "Shall I find her for you?"

"Sister Françoise may do so," decided the mistress of

novices. "Wear your shawl, Sister, and come back quickly. It is too cold and disagreeable a day to stay outdoors." There was a certain asperity in her tones and Anne's childish face looked worried. Poor Margaret Mary, always in trouble. No other novice had to endure so many trials.

"I am surprised," went on Mother Thouvant, "that Sister misunderstood about the recreation. I thought I made it quite plain that we would gather nuts only if the weather were agreeable."

"If you please, Reverend Mother," answered Anne, coming, as she intended, to her companion's defense, but only increasing Mother Thouvant's disapproval, "Sister Margaret Mary did not go to the grove to pick nuts. There is a certain spot under the trees where she loves to meditate, and I always look for her there or in the chapel when I want to find her."

Sister Anne Piedenuz looked up from her embroidery work. "I cannot understand how anyone can spend so much time in meditation," she stated candidly. "When I asked her how she did it she gave me such a strange answer."

The mistress of novices glanced curiously at her. "Strange, in what way, Sister?"

But before Sister Anne could answer, Sister Francoise hurried into the community room. She was alone and her face was contorted with fear. "Come quickly, Reverend Mother," she cried. "Something terrible has happened to Margaret Mary."

"What do you mean?" questioned the novice mistress sharply.

"I found her lying on the ground with her eyes shut and her face deathly white, and when I spoke to her, she did not answer. I called her over and over—"

"Is that all?" asked Mother Thouvant. "Why did you not try to rouse her?"

"Oh, I was too frightened to touch her," gasped Sister

Francoise. "She looked just like a dead person and she was not breathing."

This was too much for little Sister Rosselin and she began weeping frantically. Mother Thouvant did not betray any undue alarm either by word or manner. "Calm yourselves, Sisters. You are acting like silly children rather than sensible women. Perhaps Sister Margaret Mary has fainted. If so, that is nothing serious. Probably, she has fallen asleep." And without relaxing her customary poise the novice mistress walked from the room.

Outside, however, her lips compressed anxiously and she quickened her step. Not waiting to get her wrap, she hurried to the rear of the convent and into the garden. A strong wind whipped the falling leaves against her face. She stumbled, catching her foot in a tree trunk, and might have fallen except for the supporting hand which grasped her arm. Looking down, she saw the youngest novice by her side. "Please forgive me," she sobbed, "but I had to find out what's wrong with Sister Margaret Mary. Did you hurt yourself, Reverend Mother?"

"It's nothing," replied Mother Thouvant but her face softened and she did not reprimand her young charge for following her. "Would you like to rest a moment while I run on ahead?" pleaded Anne and, reading assent in the old nun's manner, she disappeared in the thicket.

Many years before when she had been one of the first to be professed at Paray, Frances Thouvant had a sweet, lovable companion who looked and acted very much like this dear little creature—Mary Aimee Rosselin, her aunt. They had grown up together, entered together and, until death had separated them, had spent their lives together. It was pleasant to have another Sister Rosselin at Paray to sometimes remind her of the days when she had been young and carefree and capable of skipping lightly over the rugged earth.

Mother Thouvant continued towards the grove, arriving there just as Margaret Mary opened her eyes and started to her feet. Apparently there was nothing wrong with her. The mistress of novices felt so relieved that she became thoroughly exasperated with Sister Alacoque. She sat down on a rustic bench and regarded her severely. "What is the meaning of this outlandish behavior?" she asked. "Do you realize that you have upset the novitiate and caused needless anxiety?"

Sister Alacoque looked slowly around as though she were viewing surroundings for the first time and finding them very strange. She did not answer Mother Thouvant's questions. Indeed, she had not heard them. The novice mistress turned to Sister Rosselin, who was helping Margaret Mary to regain her balance. "Return to the community room, Sister Rosselin, and continue your recreation. Kindly do not discuss what has happened here."

When they were alone, Mother Thouvant scrutinized Sister Alacoque intently. Her habit was bedraggled with bits of leaves and sticks, her white veil crumpled and askew. Her face, so corpse-like a few moments before, was flushed and she appeared to be emerging from a trance. Never in Mother Thouvant's long experience had a novice presented so strange a spectacle. She leaned forward and raised her voice: "What is the matter with you, Sister?" she asked.

Sister Margaret Mary seemed bewildered by the question. "Nothing, Reverend Mother, nothing at all. I came here to pray and meditate according to the way that you instructed me. See, here are the points which you wrote down for me to follow," and she drew a piece of paper from a fold in her habit.

"Wait," interrupted Mother Thouvant. "I did not instruct you to meditate during recreation time. I thought I explained very clearly on several occasions how important

it is to take part with the rest. Why were you absent from the community room?"

"I stayed away because I was trying to avoid Sister Rosselin," answered Margaret Mary honestly but unhappily. "You told me, Reverend Mother, that I should overcome my affection for her."

"A very poor excuse and a negative point of view," stated the novice mistress. "Instead of avoiding Sister Rosselin, you should cultivate more interest in your other companions." she paused and then continued. "As regards your method of prayer, Sister, these prostrations and excessive demonstrations are entirely opposed to the Visitation rule, as I have already warned you. They are neither sensible nor well-balanced and, if you persist in your extraordinary actions, I cannot recommend you for profession."

Margaret Mary turned pale and a look of unutterable sorrow filled her dark eyes. She clasped her hands in humble supplication. "Oh, I know I am not worthy to be a Sainte-Marie, but I'll do anything you command, Reverend Mother."

"All I ask is that you abide by the rule," said Mother Thouvant, relenting before the novice's sweet sincerity and meekness. "Come now, my child, you are mature enough to understand that the Visitation spirit requires only simple piety and goodness. Any action that would make a sister conspicuous is contrary to the intention of our holy founders. Let me put it this way: a Visitation nun ought not to be extraordinary except by being ordinary."

When they separated to resume their separate duties, Mother Thouvant's ears were filled with the earnest promises and grateful thanks of Sister Alacoque. She was far from convinced, however, that this problem novice would suddenly prove adaptable to the pattern placed before her, and that night she confided her uneasiness to the superior. Greatly to her surprise, she discovered that Mother Hersant

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entertained a more favorable opinion of her worrisome charge.

"She is a most unusual character," said the mother, "and extremely intelligent. However, her greatest asset is her sanctity. With time I believe we shall have a worthy Visitation nun in Sister Margaret Mary."

Mother Thouvant felt somewhat relieved by the superior's attitude. "If only she would keep her mind on the meditation and not go off into space as she did this afternoon in the nut grove," she sighed. "And such a strange place for prayer. I never saw such a sight. I'm sure we want no mystics in our order."

The mother superior smiled. "That is true. Still, I believe that we must exercise patience with Sister Alacoque. She is quite ignorant of the religious life but the time we spend in fashioning her will be well rewarded for she is excellent material. The carving of fragile and precious wood takes infinite effort and cunning of hand. So, too, in dealing with an extraordinary personality. It would be easy to mar or break the subject."

Effort and skill were the right instruments, reflected the novice mistress as she left Mother Hersant's presence. How wise in the spiritual life was their seraphic superior, who had been instructed in her youth by the saintly Jeanne de Chantal at the convent of St. Antoine in Paris.

Mother Thouvant worked out a plan for Margaret Mary. Her faults were daydreaming, wandering off by herself, endless absorption in prayer that kept her from practical duties. The remedy was simple—she must be made to realize that convent life was real, not flighty journeying into some vague and useless dreamland. Hence, work—manual occupation—was the logical antidote. Every moment of her waking day must be filled with activity. She must have no time for dreaming, no rest. As soon as the points of meditation were given, Margaret Mary must leave her companions

to their pious devotions and continue her mental prayers while physically employed in a ceaseless round of menial tasks.

Such was the cure and Mother Thouvant intended to keep up the program with relentless vigilance. What the mistress of novices did not realize was the fact that Sister Alacoque was living on a higher plane than those around her. She was not a daydreamer, she was not given to wandering in a field of pious but impractical musings. Sister Alacoque was, strange to say, the greatest realist in all Paray. She was simply living in another world.

Therein lay the underlying cause for the failure of Mother Thouvant's plan, auspicious though its beginning was. As the first step in her campaign, she placed the novice under the direction of the most capable and energetic nun in the convent, Sister Catherine Marest, the infirmarian. From dawn to dusk she worked and prayed. Her slender body had nerves of steel, tireless vitality. She was deft and assured in her movements, an excellent nurse. Although actually younger than Margaret Mary, she had been professed four years, which made her seem the elder. Here was a real Martha, busy about many things, with little understanding and less sympathy for the strange Mary given into her charge. "Keep her occupied every moment," advised the novice mistress. "Look sharp. Don't let her waste time."

Sister Catherine was displeased from the outset with Margaret Mary. A succession of mistakes wore down the patience of the infirmarian, never at any time noted for that virtue. This novice tried hard but had no talent for nursing; she was a bungler and required constant supervision. Daily Sister Catherine reprimanded her but with no practical results.

"Sister Margaret Mary, you've mixed the diets again and I've had to waste valuable time setting them right."—"Sister Margaret Mary, you're spilling that medicine. Can't

I trust you to do the slightest thing?"—"Sister Margaret Mary, I realize that you have never been around the sick, but one would think that you would at least grasp the rudiments."

Poor Margaret Mary hung her head. What was the matter? Years ago, when she was little more than a child, she had nursed her mother through a long and critical illness and later she had tended many needy sick in the village. Now it seemed that she was unable to direct her mind and hands to the work, and a feeling of desperation engulfed her. All her resolutions to listen attentively to the infirmarian, to perform each task exactly, seemed to be worthless. For always her thoughts, her entire being, swung back to the chapel and the Adorable Presence waiting for her.

And again, looking at the disconsolate figure, standing so willingly before her, the infirmarian would weaken in her determination to be firm. "There, there, Sister, I don't mean to be unkind but I must think of my sick. After this I'll ask you to do only the simplest tasks, like carrying this brazier of coal downstairs."

"Oh, thank you, Sister," responded the novice gratefully.

The infirmarian watched her pick up the heavy burden and leave. Suddenly there was a loud crash. Startled, the patients sat up in their beds. What had happened? Sister Catherine knew, even before she rushed to the head of the stairs. The novice had fallen headlong and lay in a crumpled heap at the foot. Was she dead? Injured? Would the whole place catch on fire? An acrid odor of smoke filled the air. Down the steep flight ran the infirmarian; other nuns were hurrying from all directions.

Sister Margaret Mary was stunned briefly but sustained no serious injuries. The small blaze was quickly extinguished. Sister Catherine marched directly to Mother Hersant and asked for another assistant. The novice must go. Permission was granted. Mother Thouvant's grand plan

had collapsed. She had failed to change Margaret Mary, who was, in fact, in a worse state. But Mother Thouvant was determined to go ahead. She would put Sister Alacoque in the kitchen to wash dishes and scrub floors; she would give her a hoe to work among the vegetables. She was doubly resolved to conquer this strange character.

Sister Seraphine, the cook, was a jolly, corpulent person. Outside of her pots and pans and simple prayers, she had no other pursuits. A Norman by birth, she had a rich, ruddy skin and honest blue eyes, which looked with kindly sympathy on the newcomer. She was aware in a vague way that the novice was undergoing an extraordinary trial by her superiors. However, that was no concern of hers. Sister Margaret Mary's inaptitude did not disturb her serenity of soul. Indeed, she was glad to have this new assistant and found Margaret Mary so humble, so disturbed when an accident occurred that she made light of the mishaps.

Sister Seraphine lifted the lid of the huge pot, bubbling and boiling on the immense stove. "Now for the greens, Sister Margaret Mary," she remarked, looking around for the novice. But Margaret Mary was not there, neither was she in the adjoining pantry, where the vegetables were prepared for cooking. What could have caused the delay? A simple matter of pulling herbs from the ground and washing them could hardly consume so much time.

Sister Seraphine saw the novice standing motionless, a hoe in her hand. Gently she called and Sister Margaret Mary turned slowly. "Oh, excuse me, Sister, I started to loosen the earth around these greens and I—forgot."

"There, my child, let's gather them and go back to the kitchen."

Whatever was the matter with this novice? Was it her mind? The cook found herself in difficult waters, for she was not at all familiar with mental or rather, in this case, soul disturbances. That was primarily the business of the

novice mistress and as far as the cook had observed, Mother Thouvant's methods were not successful.

Very kindly, she questioned the novice. To her surprise, Sister Margaret Mary answered calmly and with engaging candor. "Every morning I am given the points of meditation. After I write them down, I am dismissed from the choir. Then, as I work I am expected to meditate on these points. This I find impossible. I try very hard. I can't meditate and I can't work. There's a battle going on constantly inside me."

How very, very odd, thought Sister Seraphine but how understandable it makes Sister Margaret Mary. Why Mother Thouvant would not allow her to meditate with the other novices and follow the customary procedure, the cook was unable to fathom. She sighed deeply, now that she understood the case, she was quite powerless to find a remedy. However, she could be especially kind to the distracted and lovable novice, and she could try to lighten her tasks.

In the spring of the year, a change took place of great importance to the community. A new superior arrived to take the place of Mother Hersant whose tenure of office was over. Mother Mary Frances de Saumaise was fifty-two years old when she arrived at Paray-le-Monial and practically her entire life had been spent in the convent, for she had been enrolled in the Visitation Academy at Dijon as a boarder at the age of ten.

Very shortly after her arrival, Mother Thouvant explained to her the perplexing case of Sister Alacoque, the great problem at Paray. The new superior was amazed that a novice should occupy such prominence and her first reaction to Margaret Mary was not favorable. Visitation convents were havens of order and serenity, and here was an eccentric individual, who seemed a creator of disturbance. Why should a mere novice be permitted to upset the

whole convent? Why didn't they send her home? On the surface the situation seemed absurd. However, justice was strong in the new mother, and she would take no action until she was certain of the right course.

Mother de Saumaise soon discovered that her predecessor's attitude towards Sister Alacoque was not only understandable but excusable. The novice was an enigma. She could not make up her mind about her. One felt the penetrating honesty of her character, also one discerned a superior intelligence, combined with a disarming humility and gentle sweetness. To all the superior's questions, and there were many, the young woman answered with no stereotyped replies. Again and again she told Mother de Saumaise that she was unable to meditate, that despite writing the points and the constant reminders of Mother Thouvant, she could not keep her mind pinned down to the subjects. "No matter how much I try to follow the method taught me," she would say, "I always have to return to my Divine Master's way."

"And what is that way, my daughter?" probed the mother superior on one occasion.

"I do not know how to tell you," answered the novice with a gesture of helplessness. "When I kneel before Him, He speaks to my soul, telling me of His love and His sufferings, things I cannot put into words. I hear Him in the chapel, in the garden, in the nut grove."

Mother de Saumaise was reminded of a comparison made by St. Teresa between simple meditation, such as was practiced at Paray, and the heights of mystical contemplation. The saint had likened the former method to a gardener drawing water from a well by the strength of his arms, which is very hard work; the latter, to a garden which receives rain falling abundantly from heaven, as God then takes upon Himself the task of watering it with no effort on our part.

The superior thought deeply over Sister Alacoque's answers and could come to only one conclusion. Despite her immaturity in the religious life this young woman was a contemplative of a high order but, owing to her humility, entirely unaware of it. Herein lay the real cause of her inability to follow the elementary pattern of mental prayer which St. Francis de Sales had recommended to his spiritual daughters. It was too rudimentary for one whose conversation sounded like the utterances of a medieval saint. Was Paray-le-Monial actually favored with a saint? And even if a saint, was Sister Margaret Mary in the right place? The Visitation, as Mother de Saumaise reminded herself, was not a contemplative order. Was this a case, to put it in the most prosaic terms, of the square peg and the round hole? Mother Thouvant was inclined to this opinion but, like the superior, unable to reach a final decision.

The year of probation came to an end and the community met to vote on the profession of the four novices. The results, reflecting the attitude of both superior and novice mistress, were almost a foregone conclusion. The three younger members were unanimously approved. Not so Sister Alacoque. The majority of the thirty-four choir sisters voted to delay her profession. The chief count against her was failure to conform to the rule.

The approved novices entered upon their retreat in preparation for the great day of their profession, which was set for September 25, 1672. The visiting prelate, the attending clergy, the relatives and friends filled the cloister. Margaret Mary Alacoque was conspicuous by her absence.

Mother Thouvant, knowing the sadness which afflicted her, felt a tug of pity in her heart. How forlorn and disconsolate she was, not through self-pity, for what others thought of her was of no consequence, but because she was deprived of a deeper and lasting communion with her

God. The agony of her spirit was mirrored in her stricken eyes.

Mother de Saumaise also experienced a haunting sense of regret that filled her days and nights. Thoughts of the novice kept creeping into her mind, distracting her meditations, breaking in on her recreation. What was there in Margaret Mary which could so disturb her and unseat her judicial balance?

It so happened the novice was uppermost in her mind, when quite suddenly she appeared before her. Mother de Saumaise was startled. It seemed almost as if she had summoned Margaret Mary by her own mental musings. For a moment she was silent and then she quietly asked her what she wanted.

"I have been sent, Reverend Mother, with a message for you of the greatest importance."

With difficulty the superior controlled a rising emotion, for the words had a thrilling, almost fearful, import. "And by whom, Sister?"

"By Our Lord," was the simple but astounding announcement.

Breathlessly, Mother de Saumaise asked what Our Lord's message might be.

"He bids me tell you, Reverend Mother, that nothing need be feared by letting me become a sister of the Visitation Order."

Mother de Saumaise was shocked into an unpremeditated reply. "Go and ask Our Lord if you can be useful to the Order by observance of the rule." While not so intended, her words had an ironical echo. Immediately Sister Margaret Mary left her. In a short while she was back. "He says to tell you, Reverend Mother, that I shall be of greater use to the Order than you ever thought."

The superior could speak no word. That night she sum-

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moned Mother Thouvant. "I want the community to meet again and reconsider the vote on Sister Margaret Mary," she told the astonished mistress of novices.

"Is it your wish that she be professed?"

"Not my wish, Mother," said the superior gravely, "but the will of God."

Revelation

XII

Sister Margaret Mary is now a fully professed nun of the Visitation Order. No longer does the spectre of dismissal haunt her days. Also, being a sister gives her a definite standing; the Order has placed the seal of approval upon her. Mother de Saumaise, expecting a change in Margaret Mary after her profession, is grievously disappointed. There is no change, only a more powerful urge, an increase of desire to be lost in God. Paray-le-Monial now houses a great contemplative. More than ever Sister Margaret Mary is insensible to physical realities, more than ever her conduct singles her out as a striking, strange person, who cannot or will not, in the opinion of some of the nuns—conform to the rules.

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The mother superior would be severely vexed except that she knows Sister Alacoque keeps the rule of the Order in spirit, that she is always obedient when possible. But the inevitable disorder within the cloister continues and grows. Time will not solve the problem, for the discerning eyes of Mother de Saumaise watch Margaret Mary becoming more and more a creature of another world. Desperately, she repeats the ordeal of trying to keep the nun occupied physically, though she realizes this is but futile treatment and, furthermore, custom forbids that she treat her as a novice.

To Margaret Mary profession is the open door through which she finds the Saviour. Time and place have become meaningless. Always she feels the wonderful and comforting Presence. It is habitual, this sensation. She cannot express this in words, which are totally inadequate. The Presence is stronger, more compelling than the nuns walking about her or the hard wood on which she kneels. The trees in the nut grove, the birds flitting through the garden and trilling their sweet tunes are not so apparent as this Presence which walks with her. The spiritual, unrestrained, takes possession of her; on its wings she is transported to another world, a place of beauty and mystery. Before the altar she is motionless, on her face a rapt look. Repeatedly she must be called. Like one drugged, she struggles back to earth.

None can feel in the convent the same happiness as this lately-professed sister, yet none suffers with such torment. To leave that other world and struggle back to her physical senses is a kind of death in reverse. Besides, too, she is not sure, can never know, when the Presence may desert her. She fears that with an unutterable fear. She could not live, if she ever knew that some day the Divine would forsake her and drop her back into everyday living. At the same time she is scourged with the thought of her own unworthiness. Why should she be selected among all the other

sisters for these heavenly favors? At every possible chance she seeks to hide her feelings from the community. Her tender, sensitive heart is deeply afflicted by slighting and taunting remarks.

But all these things she can endure so long as it is possible, kneeling before the Divine Presence, to feel herself carried away, to feel her soul drifting out of that encumbrance, her body. Eyes, ears become detrimental things, for now she sees and hears with her soul. Like a bodiless spirit, an angel, she is guided by intuitive and tremendous powers. Her deserted body is like a corpse when vision and ecstasy seize her, like a worn, threadbare garment tossed aside as useless. Only when the extraordinary gift is withdrawn does she feel the fever and torment in her body.

Sister Margaret Mary does not know the stupendous purpose of these mystical communications, but the day when it will be announced to her is at hand. Her soul, purified and elevated to a supernal degree, is prepared to sustain the great revelation. For the world in this latter half of the seventeenth century is "frozen by age" and must needs "rekindle its warmth from divine love," as was prophesied by St. Gertrude in an earlier and more fervent era. More than three hundred and fifty years have passed since the great medieval seer had foretold that God's burning love for mankind would manifest itself in a new and wonderful way. And now the time has come when the icy fetters binding this frozen world are to be melted and dissolved in the furnace of celestial fire.

This is, in truth, a cold and arid period of Christianity in many lands. For the past century Protestantism has discarded the Mass, central act of Christian faith, and rejected the Eucharist. Multitudes feed no more on the Bread of Life, nor find sweet solace before the Tabernacle. Churches have ceased to house the Living God, and have become empty meeting halls. Heart and feeling have been replaced

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with exaggerated rigorism; the terrifying teachings of Calvinism have enchained men's minds with darkness and despair. Even within the Church the pernicious influence is gaining momentum. The errors of Jansenism, which bears the marks of the self styled reformers, are spreading not only among the laity but in the monastery and cloister. A barrier of discouragement and vain fears has been built between the Holy Eucharist and the faithful. Under the pretext of holiness, the source of all holiness has been made unapproachable. Frequent Communion, universal custom of the early Church, has fallen into disuse, for men no longer dare to receive their Eucharistic Lord. So far had this un-Catholic dread developed that it had become quite common for parish priests to proclaim without any concern, that only at Easter—and then in compliance with the law of the Church—did they open their tabernacles for their people to receive the Sacrament. Tepidity, indifference and coldness were the logical results. Such were the conditions at the time when the fire of God's love was to be rekindled through a cloistered nun hidden away from the world in a little town of Burgundy. . . .

It is December 27, 1673, the Feast of St. John, the Apostle of charity, who had leaned upon the Heart of Jesus and to whom had been given the inexpressible gift of drawing something of infinite compassion from that divine organ. It was the same loyal Apostle who had remained at the foot of the cross with the Virgin Mother and shared her agony when the centurion pierced that Heart, drawing from It the last droplet of blood.

In the convent chapel, where the Blessed Sacrament is exposed on the altar, Sister Margaret Mary is kneeling close to the grille of the choir. Today she falls at once into an ecstatic state. Her eyes are open but unseeing, her ears hear no sound, her body is rigid. With incredible swiftness, not only her surroundings are blotted out but her own

person is fading away and she is in a timeless space. But quickly as she is reduced to nothingness, just as quickly a new and strange life rises within her. The surge of love which lifts and rushes her toward the Beloved knows no restraint. There is complete abandonment in her soul as the Presence envelopes and holds her enthralled. Her total awareness is activated by Him, she dwells within Him. Never before has she attained this unity. She sees and hears with amazing powers but not through her bodily senses. This ecstasy has become rapture.

The Voice speaks to her, tells her to take the place of St. John and lean upon His breast. Suddenly she is leaning on His Sacred Heart and He is revealing to her that depthless abyss of infinite compassion. Secrets of immeasurable and profound sweetness—inexplicable wonders that can never be translated into mere words—are laid bare to her enraptured spirit. For a long time she rests in beatific communion. She discerns in a transcendent flash of revelation something of the immensity of Our Lord's love for all mankind, a love so intense that His Divine Heart can no longer contain the burning flames of its ardor but must spread them abroad. And now a wondrous spectacle is presented to her soul's vision, for she sees the Heart of the God-Man shining in every direction, more brilliant than the sun and transparent as crystal. The wound He received on the Cross is plainly visible. There is a crown of thorns around It and a cross above It. Here are precious treasures that contain all the graces needed to save men's souls.

Now a stab of fear assails her, for she hears her Lord revealing that she is to be the means of showing forth the love of His Sacred Heart to men. "I have chosen you," He tells her. But how could anyone so unfit accomplish such a great design? Her soul cries out that it is an abyss of unworthiness and ignorance. He speaks again and her terror melts under the comforting reassurance of His answer.

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Everything will be accomplished by Him, her very weakness and incapability will serve as instruments of His will. Without hesitation she now accepts the tremendous mission.

Having imposed this obligation upon her, Our Lord adds an ineffable reward for her voluntary surrender and loving acceptance. He asks for her heart. In a mysterious but delectable fashion it is placed within His own, where it appears as an infinitesimal atom consumed in a glowing furnace. Then from the burning immensity of His Divine Heart, Jesus withdraws a flame which is heart-shape. She realizes that it is her own heart, which He puts back whence He had taken it, saying: "There, My well-beloved, is a pledge of My love. I have shut into your side a little spark from the living flames of My love."

She knows now that she can never be the same, that this flame of love will burn within her breast as long as she lives, the sign of perpetual unity between His Heart and her own. The rapture of that bond is exquisite to the point of agony. His Voice resounds through her spirit. "Hitherto you have called yourself My slave. Now you are the disciple of My Sacred Heart."

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Sister Margaret Mary did not know when the vision ceased. Our Lord did not fade away, nor suddenly disappear. She had not perceived Him with bodily eyes, had not heard His Voice with her ears. The miraculous event was enacted wholly within her mind. It was an intellectual phenomenon, more distinct, more vivid than any external apparition might have been. So sharply was it carved on her memory, she would be able to give an exact account of it, even though the human tongue could not picture the glory and beauty which accompanied the revelation. Like St. Paul when rapt to the third heaven could only affirm:

"Whether in the body or out of the body, I know not: God knoweth: that he was caught up into paradise, and heard secret words, which it is not granted man to utter."

Sister Margaret Mary's return to her surroundings was slow and painful to an agonizing degree. Unable to utter only a few incoherent words, she was carried to her cell. For several days she could neither eat nor sleep. The effects of ascending the great heights attained by her spirit were too much for the body. Only partly conscious, she could give but a meagre account of what had happened in response to Mother de Saumaise's questionings. She was like a person under the influences of a powerful opiate. Her distracted appearance and strange behavior could not fail to arouse a furor of speculation and comment throughout the community. To the great distress of the mother superior and others in authority, the house was thrown into a state of irritating disorder which increased day by day despite every effort to quell it.

"I cannot see why we must put up with all this nonsense," said Sister Magdalen des Escures to a group of sisters during recreation one January afternoon. She was only five or six years older than Margaret Mary but had been professed almost fifteen years. Her manner was emphatic and her bright blue eyes and square chin bespoke a dominant personality as well as a matter-of-fact point of view. "We are supposed to be intelligent but we permit ourselves to be completely upset by the fanatical antics of one individual."

Sister Antoinette de Coligny, an elderly religious with a long, narrow face, glanced cautiously around to make sure that the object of the discussion was not in the community room. "Do you think that she has become deranged?" she inquired curiously.

"No, I couldn't go that far," returned Sister Magdalen, "but she is very peculiar. Not the well-balanced, sensible

type which is best suited to community life. I always thought it was a mistake to profess her."

"Exactly my own opinion," exclaimed Sister Claudia d'Amanze, one of the older, more conservative members of the community. Like Sister Antoinette she had relinquished a title to become a Sainte-Marie and her family was among the noblest in Burgundy. "She simply does not belong at Paray. One cannot help asking why she was permitted to take her final vows."

"But she was more normal when she was a novice," pointed out Sister Antoinette. "Haven't you noticed, Sisters," and her glance included several more in the group, "how these strange tendencies have developed since her profession? She seems to have lost control of her faculties. It's uncanny."

A pleasant-looking nun with kind brown eyes and a sweet smile joined the discussion. "I am afraid you do not understand Sister Margaret Mary. She is a very holy person and cannot be measured by ordinary standards. When she prays she becomes carried away. I believe her soul leaves her body."

"Ah, Sister Marie-Christine, that is true," spoke up Sister Jeanne Contois, who was sitting next to her. "I have often watched her in the chapel and I am sure she is a saint. I'll never forget her face the day she took her final vows. It was shining like an angel's."

Sister Claudia frowned, as if her thoughts were difficult to express. "One understands, of course, that Sister Alacoque imagines she ascends into higher spheres when she falls into that trance-like state. I would not accuse her of deliberately attempting to deceive others, but it is quite possible that she is self-deceived."

"A victim of her own lively imagination," agreed Sister Magdalen, secretly amused at the promise of a verbal tilt between the protagonists and antagonists of that deluded

Margaret Mary. She was not harsh by nature but she liked to inquire into things. Also she was somewhat ironical and not without humor, although conservative and dogmatic.

"One can hardly dismiss the matter so simply," said Sister Antoinette with a portentous manner that had an impressive effect. "It is not only great mystics whose souls leave their bodies. One sometimes reads of ignorant, self-deluded persons who have induced this state with dreadful results. I do not think Sister Margaret Mary is a saint. I think she is doing a very dangerous thing."

"What do you mean, Sister?" asked Sister Jeanne defensively.

"It is not my intention to be uncharitable," replied the older nun. "And what I am going to tell you is not meant for a reflection on any member of the community. It's an evil that might befall anyone, though thank God, it is rare in our day."

The thrill of fear went through the group and all looked serious with the exception of Sister Magdalen whose smile was faintly derisive. She considered the elderly aristocrat's weird hints as sheer dramatics. The case of Sister Alacoque to her was simple, a rustic young woman with delusions.

Sister Antoinette was leaning forward and her thin, nasal voice rose to a higher pitch. Several younger nuns joined her listeners. "No one dare deny that the world is filled with evil spirits wandering about seeking whom they may devour. There have been instances where souls have left their bodies and been unable to return for—"and she paused to give the proper suspense to her conclusion—"while they were out of them, something entered in—something terrible and inhuman with dark powers to deceive even the elect."

"You mean—the devil!" gasped Sister Claudia in mingled fear and admiration.

Sister Magdalen's smile broke into a laugh. "Now you are as fantastical as our poor Margaret Mary. I don't know

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what we are coming to at Paray! What we need is a good, solid dose of the common sense of St. Francis de Sales."

Sister Marie-Christine Melin rose from her chair. "I feel very much ashamed of this idle talk. May the Good God forgive you for your baseless insinuations against an innocent person!"

"I share your sentiments," added Sister Contois stoutly. "Sister Margaret Mary couldn't be possessed. See how the little children in the school love her. They follow her whenever they can. I have always observed that children recognize goodness instinctively. Innocence calls to innocence."

But the majority of Sister Antoinette's audience felt no such confidence regarding their strange companion. Like Sister Claudia, who was quite convinced that Margaret Mary was possessed by the devil, her position of seniority in the community, her worldly background of great wealth and culture gave added weight to her words. They were bound to make an impression, especially among the more conservative sisters who had looked upon Margaret Mary with distrust and suspicion from the start. And even among the younger nuns there were many who whispered among themselves and shook their heads.

Little Sister Rosselin indignantly denied each rumor and championed her friend with tears in her eyes. Not so her other companions of the novitiate. Both Sister Anne and Sister Francoise came to the conclusion that poor Margaret Mary had lost her mind and was not responsible for her actions.

"She was always a little cracked," said the former. "Mother Thouvant could do nothing with her, no matter how hard she tried."

"I remember the hours she spent on her knees," recalled the latter. "Even then she used to lose her senses and look like a dead person. It used to frighten the wits out of me."

"I asked her once how she could stay that way so long," went on Sister Anne, "and she told me she hardly knew she had a body. Wasn't that strange?"

"No one could make me believe she is possessed," said Sister Francoise. "She is out of her head but perfectly harmless."

"And so good and simple," sighed Anne. "What a pity! Maybe the Good God will restore her mind."

Sister Rosselin burst into tears and ran to her beloved Margaret Mary to be consoled and comforted. She found her on the school playground, where the boarding pupils were romping and running about in the cold, sunny air. The day students, whose homes were in Paray, were leaving with their school bags on their arms. Several were talking to Sister Margaret Mary, who had become a great favorite during the while she had been in charge of a class of smaller children. It didn't take long to find out that the young sister was kind and indulgent and always ready to forgive. There were only two faults that Sister Alacoque could not tolerate: one was telling stories about people, the other was carrying tales. As Sister Rosselin came up she heard a girl saying to her companion. "There, Louise, it serves you right. I told you Sister Margaret Mary would not listen to you. What did she say?" And Louise, whose cheeks were rosy from more than the cold, hung her head and admitted: "She said I should tell on myself, not on other people."

Sister Rosselin, who was on the point of telling her friend the dreadful things that some of the nuns had been saying about her, came to an abrupt pause. It was quite evident Margaret Mary disapproved of repeating gossip. Still it seemed only proper to warn her against her enemies and also to comfort her by letting her know that her friends did not think in this evil manner.

Margaret Mary's face wore an indulgent smile as she looked into the little sister's large, innocent eyes. She

seemed troubled and embarrassed. "What's on your mind, dear?" she asked.

"When someone speaks harshly about one's friend," began Sister Anne. "Don't you think it's only right to tell—"

"I know what you want to tell me," interrupted Margaret Mary quietly, for she suddenly realized that the distressed girl was greatly disturbed by the criticism directed against herself. Poor little Anne, she must set her at ease and drive away her worry. "I have been called a fool, a lunatic and one possessed of the devil. Isn't that right?"

Sister Anne was amazed. So Margaret Mary knew all these things but had made no effort to defend herself! How deeply must she have suffered in silence the outrageous malice of bitter tongues! Now more than ever she wanted to help her dear comrade. She threw her arms around Margaret Mary and burst into tears.

Gently Sister Margaret Mary disengaged her. "Dry your tears, dear Sister. Don't try to commiserate me for that is not necessary. Jesus is all we need. Are we not made for Him? He is our only consolation, in Him is our only repose of mind. If we love Him with all our strength He will teach us to bear all our sufferings in silence for His sake. His love sweetens all the bitterness of life."

The little friend realized that Margaret Mary did not need her sympathy, for God had so taken possession of her heart that she no longer required the consolation of human creatures. That was, of course, a very great blessing—such detachment from life was sublime—but the realization saddened Sister Anne. It was hard for the average person to understand, such holy detachment, even for one trained in the convent to meditate upon divine things.

Sister Anne looked at the trees, sharply etched against the sunlit sky. There was no wind and the few remaining leaves were perfectly still. In the distance the laughing voices of the departing children rang out musically in the

thin clear air. She rubbed her hands together for warmth—the cold, the trees against the sky, the far-away voices. . . . These were reality for her, but Sister Margaret Mary knew a higher state of being. “Why, it’s something like death,” said Sister Anne to herself. “Such indifference is not of this world.”

The Lord's Appointed

XIII

It is a day within the Octave of Corpus Christi, 1674, and the Blessed Sacrament is exposed on the altar in the convent chapel. The Visitation Order observes a special devotion to Our Lord in the Tabernacle, bequeathed to it by the founders. It is late spring and a profusion of flowers decks the altar, the glow of candle-light adds luster to their rich and colorful blooms.

Sister Margaret Mary kneels upright behind the grille. Her large and somewhat staring eyes are immovably fixed on the round, immaculate Host in the golden monstrance. As usual, she presents herself before the Sacrament with an immediate enormous attention. Jesus is there and that suffices. The call of whistling birds in the garden, the rum-

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ble of traffic on the street outside, the faint rustlings of adorers in the chapel, fade away.

Alone, she looks into the monstrance center; beneath the humility of bread, she is intensely aware of the Divine Presence. Her soul goes questing out to Him. This is customary with her but today there is a difference. She feels that some especial favor will be shown her, an invisible radiation is coming forth from that little white circle. The beauty of the flowers, the soft honey-colored sheen of candles have gone. Only the Host remains and as she watches, It suddenly stirs and begins to enlarge. The pointed ends of the monstrance are no longer lifeless metal but dart away in blazing splendor. A change is taking place within her, also. She seems to be light as thin, luminous air, the weight of her body is vanishing.

Margaret Mary sees a wonderful transformation as Our Lord appears before her. He is brilliant in glory and around Him is a vast aura of light before which the dazzling sun would be a dim and feeble flicker. His appearance arouses within her heart so great a joy that it is almost impossible to bear. He does not look like any of the conventional pictures she has ever seen. The great works of the immortal artists have only miserably conceived the beauty and majesty of His Face and figure. There never was among the children of men His equal. He is the most beautiful of men. Nose and mouth are faultless and His hazel eyes beam with sublime amiability. His stature is straight and nobly proportioned, neither tall nor short.

Margaret Mary continues to gaze upon her Divine Lord. He is clad in a long tunic of gleaming whiteness, so soft and yet so dazzling that it is like no known material. It is loosely tied at the waist with a narrow girdle of purest gold. Over the tunic is a cloak, opening and flowing, whose color does not fall within any classification, for it is neither crimson, nor yet scarlet, nor ruby but rather an indefinable

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combination of all three, a shade more vibrant and glowing than ever beheld by mortal eye. His hair is the same color as His eyes, a rich luxuriant golden brown. His thick curling beard is short and divided at the chin. He inclines His head slightly and a burnished blue reflection shows in His eyes and upon the wavy locks that fall over His shoulders. This strangely lovely blue Margaret Mary has never before seen. The clear azure of a cloudless sky seems dull when compared with it. His skin is warmly tinged, without wrinkle or blemish. The wounds on His hands and feet are so gloriously brilliant that she can only describe them later as "shining like suns." His whole sacred humanity is bathed in celestial fire, most of all His breast, the center from which it radiates.

Forever and forever could Margaret Mary kneel before Her sweet Master and silent, gaze at the incomprehensible glory of His Person. Those amiable eyes were the same which wept over Lazarus and the city of Jerusalem, those same strong hands gathered the children on His bosom, those same beautiful feet had stopped so He might heal blind Bartimeus at Jericho's gate. But her penetrating vision is suddenly arrested by a movement of the Saviour. His right hand inclines towards His breast and as it touches it, the garment dissolves and His Heart, burning with the fire of infinite love, is displayed as the source of the divine conflagration. Oh, never could the most piercing intellect conceive, though it might spend a lifetime in striving, the meaning of the mystery of God's love and longing for humanity, as revealed in the unquenchable flames of His Sacred Heart!

As Margaret Mary continues to gaze and adore, the radiance of the divine countenance is shadowed by a look of ineffable sadness. Jesus speaks and reveals the cause of His sufferings. It is the ingratitude of men for all He has done for them. Coldness and rebuffs are their return for His

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eagerness to do them good. Not even the sufferings of His Passion were as great as the pain caused by callous humanity down through the ages.

Margaret Mary's soul cries out its passionate adoration. Her heart pulsates with divine fire, she prostrates herself before Him in an access of sacrificial devotion. She longs to suffer for His sake, her only wish is to love Him and make others love Him. Our Lord's face becomes transfigured with happiness, He holds out His arms in blessing, He tells her that her love consoles and rejoices Him. He asks her to make up, as far as she is able, for all the ingratitude and coldness of a hardened and sinful world. She trembles, for she knows how utterly incompetent she is to accomplish such an overwhelming purpose. She envisions a vast barrier of ice, a huge frozen mountain, which she must melt with a tiny flame. Immense and hopeless task!

As she reels before the prospect, Our Lord says: "This will supply for all deficiencies," and suddenly a flame gushes from His Heart and penetrates her whole being with such heat that she cannot bear it. Surely she must be entirely consumed by its intensity. She cries aloud:

"Have pity, Lord, I can no longer endure."

"I will be your strength. Fear nothing. I shall fit you for the accomplishments of My designs." At the sound of His voice the flame is withdrawn and at the same time, all her doubts and weakness vanish. In some mysterious way, the fire has hardened her spirit like tempered steel. She waits in rapture to hear His commands. He tells her to receive Him often in Holy Communion, always on the first Friday of every month.

Margaret Mary is eager to obey so sweet and pleasant a request. How simple and yet how incomprehensible are the ways of God! He has appointed her the Apostle of His Sacred Heart and assigned to her a seemingly impossible task, yet the manner in which she is to accomplish it, is sim-

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plicity itself. She understands that the devotion to the Sacred Heart must not be forced. It will insinuate itself gently by the sweet unction of charity in the hearts which are to receive it, like oil and precious balm, whose substance runs softly and whose odor spreads itself gradually around.

Jesus has more to speak to her. "Every night between Thursday and Friday, I will make you share in the overwhelming sadness which I was pleased to feel in the Garden of Olives . . . this sadness shall reduce you to an agony harder to endure than death itself . . . to bear Me company in the humble prayer I offered to My Father in the midst of My anguish, you shall rise between eleven o'clock and midnight and remain prostrate for an hour."

Jesus is inviting her to share in His sufferings. By her acts of reparation she can mitigate in some way the bitterness He felt when His apostles abandoned Him and He sorrowfully reproached them for not being able to watch for an hour with Him. And she can make sin less hateful by her prayers for sinners. This divine favor Margaret Mary joyfully accepts. How can one love a Crucified God without living and dying with Him on the Cross? Her soul, which the divine fire has consumed, can have no other exercise but to love in suffering. . . .

* * * *

When consciousness returned to Sister Margaret Mary, her body was wracked by fever. Unable to move hand or foot, she was carried to the mother superior's cell and left there. The frightened nuns who discovered her, lying on the floor in the chapel, decided that only Mother de Sau-maise was the proper person to deal with her. She made only confused and stammering answers which were very disquieting to Mother de Saumaise. It was incredible that Our Lord actually appeared to Sister Alacoque. That would

presuppose that the nun was a saint. Yet to all outward appearances she was far from a saint. Did saints mumble forth their visions and act like lunatics? Wasn't it more reasonable to conclude that Sister Alacoque had contracted a serious illness of some sort which had produced a raging fever accompanied by strange hallucinations? Mother de Saumaise had Margaret Mary carried to the infirmary and sent for Dr. Billet, medical attendant of the community. She awaited the results of his diagnosis in a state of nervous anxiety.

Dr. Guillaume Billet enjoyed the reputation of being the most skilled physician of the provinces but he was unable to arrive at a scientific explanation of the young sister's condition. This was not the first time he had been called to attend her and on each occasion Mother de Saumaise had answered his searching questions quite frankly. The doctor was a deeply religious man and one of his brothers was a celebrated priest, which facts made it easier for the mother superior to discuss with him Sister Alacoque's strange trances and ecstasies. By no means skeptical, he did not believe in looking for miracles. Events above the laws of nature were to be numbered among the extraordinary and exceedingly rare. He had heard of strange sicknesses but such cases were accompanied by malignant symptoms and he could find no organic disorder in this patient. Hers was a baffling condition.

"She is seriously ill, doctor?" asked Mother de Saumaise.

"She is very weak and her fever is high. If I could ascertain the cause, I could prescribe the proper treatment," answered the doctor dubiously.

"Do you believe she will recover, doctor?" went on the mother superior anxiously.

"Yes, mother, that is my opinion," answered the physician. "Sister Alacoque is capable of enduring great pain. I'm certain her mind suffers as well as her body."

"Then you think she is suffering from a mental disorder? Please do not hesitate to tell me—"

The physician interrupted with an emphatic shake of the head. "No, no, Mother, do not mistake me. There is nothing the matter with the patient's mental faculties. She is most intelligent and clear-headed. However, I think there is a mental struggle of some kind that is the basis for her physical condition. I shall be able to judge better after observing her for a few days."

The mother superior remained in her cell for hours, trying to piece together the broken sentences, the fragmentary and inadequate account Margaret Mary had given of her vision. At last Mother de Saumaise reached a decision, the only one which seemed reasonable to her. Margaret Mary was the victim of an illusion of her overwrought imagination and extreme piety. Mother de Saumaise could not accept as real her incredible statements.

It hurt the sympathetic heart of the superior when she visited Margaret Mary in the infirmary and the sick nun timidly asked for permission to receive Holy Communion on the First Friday and observe the Holy Hour. In all honesty, Mother de Saumaise could not conceal her dubious opinion of Margaret Mary's vision. And that doubt wounded the afflicted sister deeply, for her sole intent was to fulfil the divine commands.

What if I refuse her, the mother superior asked herself. Surely that would not be unreasonable in view of her serious physical condition. If she is obedient, as always, she may see how mistaken she was. Maybe she will admit that she is not at all sure of what happened. In which case, I will feel peace of mind and be able to calm her feverish excitement.

Mother de Saumaise leaned over and took Sister Alacoque's hand in hers. "I am sorry to disappoint you, my child," she said gently, "but I must refuse permission. You are not well enough to get up."

Margaret Mary's eyes wore an anguished look of grief. Here at the very outset she was unable to follow her Beloved's commands. Oh, if only Mother de Saumaise knew the impetuous urge of her heart! Suddenly hope crossed her face. "Mother, if I were well enough, would you let me follow His wishes?"

Since Mother de Saumaise had based her refusal on Margaret Mary's physical state, she could not with reason retreat from that position. "Yes, if you were strong enough, if the fever and fainting were to go away—"

A light of hope shone in the young sister's eyes. "Then I shall ask Him to cure me at once," she exclaimed confidently.

Mother de Saumaise was visibly impressed by the fervid outcry. At least, it proved her sincerity. Margaret Mary believed in herself. She might be deceived, poor creature, but it was the deception of an earnest and truthful person.

Later in the day the mother again conferred with Dr. Billet, who was still quite dubious of the patient's condition. "I am unable to find a remedy for the recurrent attacks of fever," he candidly admitted. "And the sinking spells are very frequent. It will take a long time for her to recover."

The following morning Mother de Saumaise was visited by Sister Catherine Marest. The busy infirmarian wore a look of unusual excitement. Without preamble she stated that Sister Alacoque was well and insisted on returning to her duties. Mother de Saumaise was astounded. This bordered on the miraculous, yesterday racked and prostrated by fever and now in good health! Yet one must not lightly pronounce a cure as being actuated by divine power. Mother de Saumaise, above all persons, would be the last to admit the miraculous. One believed in miracles, of course, but Holy Mother the Church only pronounces on the facts after rigid investigation. Did not Dr. Billet state that Sister Margaret Mary was suffering from some form of mental

combat? Was it not possible, if that struggle should suddenly end, that the fever would immediately cease? It was very significant though, that now she could not refuse the nun's request to honor Our Lord's agony in the Garden by watching one hour on Thursday night and to receive Communion on the First Friday. Sister Margaret Mary had won her permission.

Mother de Saumaise now tried another way, she asked Margaret Mary to write a complete and detailed account of her interior life and revelations. From the look of distress on the sister's face she was aware that this was most repugnant but obedience would guide her. "Now," thought the superior, "I shall be able to study Sister Alacoque's case with greater comprehension. When I have her statement before me in black and white, I can clarify my opinion."

Mother de Saumaise had a great surprise in store for her when she received Sister Alacoque's account. Written in her large, clear, almost childishly-round hand, the document bore evidence of a state of mystical union with the Divine. The superior was amazed and impressed. The language was as individual as the handwriting. Its simplicity and originality ruled out any possibility that it might be an unconscious copy of the life of some great contemplative which had influenced the writer. This was Margaret Mary Alacoque's soul bared before her.

After the troubled superior had digested the account, she sought the advice of Father Michon, the convent father-confessor. A simple, pious priest from the parish church of St. Nicolas, his learning was barely sufficient for his sacred office. With great reluctance he listened to the mother superior's talk of mystic ecstasies. Being a kind-hearted man, he did not abruptly dismiss the subject, even though he found it annoying. But Mother de Saumaise continued to press the point sharply. Father Michon squirmed in his chair. He would like to be walking outside in the clear

sunlight, enjoying the natural blessings of the Good God and not listening to all this nonsensical conversation about unitive ways and mysticism. It sounded pretty crazy and he wondered why the superior, who had always seemed to him a very intelligent lady, could be so concerned. One knew about the seven Sacraments, the Apostles Creed, the Commandments,—that should be sufficient. These abstruse matters were for great scholars to argue about. He had no interest in them whatsoever. Suddenly Father Michon had a bright idea. Why not call in some theologians? They might enjoy what only disturbed him.

"Mother de Saumaise, I think it would be wise to bring in someone learned in theological matters," said the chaplain.

The mother superior was pleased with the suggestion of the humble, ignorant cleric. "Ah, Father, that is indeed a happy thought," she exclaimed, relief mingled with satisfaction in her cultivated voice. "Your pastor, Father Bouillet, would be an excellent choice."

"He is too practical," demurred the chaplain, "I was thinking of the Jesuit superior, Father Papon. As you know, Reverend Mother, he is a great theologian. When he was a professor at Lyons, before coming here, scholars flocked to hear. Then, too, there is the great biblical scholar, Father Francois of the Benedictine Abbey."

Mother de Saumaise was delighted with these two learned clerics, though faintly amused that Father Bouillet was ruled out because of his practicality. Evidently the chaplain considered nuns impractical creatures.

Father Michon departed in haste. He stopped at the Jesuit house only a few hundred yards from the Visitation convent. Father Papon laughed heartily at his story but accepted. Now Father Michon hurried up the rue du Perrier where the parish church was located. It was served by secular clergy who had formed a religious society called the

Mepart, composed exclusively of natives of the town. His pastor listened while the simple Michon related his interview with Mother de Saumaise.

"You have performed very well," said Father Bouillet. "A Jesuit and a Benedictine, besides your good self. Excellent, the ecclesiastical proprieties will be observed, Paray being under the jurisdiction of both His Lordship, the Bishop of Autun, and the Abbot of Cluny, and the Jesuits having a local church, all parties will be represented."

Father Michon said nothing in reply but his hopes of dodging out of the consultation were doomed. Out into the street he hurried to the Benedictine monastery, a branch of the Cluny motherhouse. As he approached the ancient structure with its immense tower and two minor ones which dominated the town, he slowed his pace. The majesty of the huge stone pile, one of the finest examples of Burgundian Romanesque, as always, made him pause. Though unlettered, he was susceptible to beauty and the Abbey was a religious epic in granite. Father Francois was corpulent with a round, apple-red face. His unkempt, shaggy beard, still black though he was past middle-age, gave him a somewhat wild appearance. He considered with a slow frown Father Michon's proposal. His large, round head was bent over a big book from which he looked up from time to time to ask a question. Finally, he closed the book, gave a sniff through his curved nose and exclaimed: "There is a possibility of heresy in what you say, though I imagine it is only the pious dreams of an untutored mind."

The examination of the learned theologians was an exquisite torture to the sensitive Sister Alacoque. She had developed such an interior state of mind that, to her, the exterior world had become painful. Added to this general condition, to try to explain before these skeptical clergy Our Lord's manifestation was an inquisition.

From the outset, she was greatly confused. She stumbled

and hesitated, was incapable of answering the questions they put to her. It was like the battle of a child armed with a stick against a warrior skilled in the use of the broadsword or a professional duelist wielding a rapier with lightning speed. The Benedictine silenced her with quotations from the Scriptures and the smiling Jesuit courteously but firmly suggested that her visions were nothing but illusions produced by reading the lives of the saints. She had no opportunity to defend herself as she was drawn away into lanes of thought which were indirect and clouded the issue.

Mother de Saumaise, present at the examination, was bitterly disappointed in Sister Alacoque. Indeed, it hardly seemed possible that this could be the same person who had written so fluently and so lucidly of her visions. Father Michon took no part in the investigation but watched Sister Alacoque's flushed face with a feeling of pity. His kind heart was afflicted as he sensed something of her humiliation and inward suffering. Poor creature, why couldn't she be sensible and play with the school children!

Yet the Benedictine and the Jesuit were not cruel men. They had not the slightest wish to hurt Sister Alacoque nor had they the slightest belief in her revelations. The easiest way to cure this romantic pietist was to dismiss in a light manner her absurd and ridiculous statements.

Margaret Mary left the room but not before she heard the booming voice of Father Francois declare: "She needs more nourishment for her frail body. When the stomach is too empty, the head becomes too full. Give her soup, Reverend Mother, plenty of good soup with many vegetables."

Soup—poor Sister Alacoque felt like a traitor to her Beloved. She had failed Him. She had been unable to impart the message of the Sacred Heart to these anointed of the Lord. Surely, they must have believed and accepted eagerly, if she had proved worthy of the trust imposed upon her.

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Father Michon's face brightened as he left with his clerical companions. Soup, what an excellent remedy! Just what this deluded soul needed, plenty of good thick soup with many vegetables. It might be the very cure for all such fanciful dreams. He could not follow the lofty intellects of these scholars, but soup—ah, that was something to be considered well. Made from good vegetables, the gift of God's bountiful earth. Yes, soup would cure the poor young sister. After all; these bookish clergy could be practical.

* * * *

After the theological session, Sister Margaret Mary was in a state of despair. A ponderous weight pressed down on her spirit, shutting out all joy. Her great opportunity to tell the proper Church authorities of the wondrous revelations of the Sacred Heart was lost. She was an obstacle to Its loving designs. She wanted to run away and hide but where could she run, to what hiding place? She dared not confide further in Mother de Saumaise, for the superior must be disgusted with her foolish replies. She must now consider her ridiculous.

Sister Margaret Mary ran to the chapel. "I shall hide in His Heart," she said to herself. "Though I have failed Him, He will forgive me."

As she knelt, her dark, fearful thoughts began to dissolve. Her gaze lovingly centered on the tabernacle. Outside the day was ending, shadows fell softly in the chapel. It was very still, very peaceful.

"I will send you My perfect servant and faithful friend." The words came quietly into her soul. "Confide in him. Fear not."

Joy and gratitude flooded her. Her Divine Master was sending someone, some powerful, saintly person to help her. She was not to be frightened or disheartened any more.

"This Is He"

XIV

It was a cold raw afternoon toward the middle of February, 1675, a day to find the marrow of one's bones, when gray clouds obscured the lengthening sunlight and penetrating mists hung like a shroud over dead grass and leafless boughs. In the community room, where the sisters were gathered for the recreation hour, great logs burned cheerily in the huge fireplace. Most comfortable spot in the convent, it was crowded and an unusual buzz of animated talk resounded from the various groups of young and old, lively and sedate. The weather, however, was not the cause of the large and talkative gathering, for today there was something much more exciting to discuss, the new Jesuit superior, just arrived in Paray to succeed Father Papon.

Interest centered around several Paray sisters who were often visited in the parlor by their old schoolmate, Mademoiselle Marie de Lionne, a young woman with an exceptionally wide acquaintance. From her the sisters had received firsthand information regarding Father de la Colombiere. She had often heard him preach in Lyons, where she spent the greater part of her time. When in Paray she stayed at the castle beyond the Abbey, home of her brother, the governor.

"Father de la Colombiere is really brilliant," Sister Genevieve, a distant cousin of Mademoiselle de Lionne, was saying. "He has made his mark in Lyons as a professor at Trinity and is a wonderful preacher."

"Imagine burying a man like that in Paray," exclaimed Sister Magdalen. "From Trinity college, where they must have two thousand students, to a little school of thirty."

"One cannot always tell why changes are made in a religious order," spoke up an elderly nun. "All must accept with humility and see the hand of God in the transition."

"Very true, Sister Elizabeth," agreed Sister Magdalen, "but even so, my curiosity is aroused. What else did Mademoiselle de Lionne say about the career of this remarkable priest?"

"Oh, a great deal," responded little Sister Rosselin, whose parents were intimate friends of the governor. "She said he was quite famous before he was sent to Lyons. He used to be connected with the court in Paris and knew the King."

There was a murmur of astonishment at the remark, which Sister Celeste, also of Paray, explained. "Father de la Colombiere was tutor to the sons of the minister of finance for several years."

Her listeners were impressed, for even in this small cloister of distant Burgundy the renown of the all-powerful Jean Baptiste Colbert was well known. "A very dis-

tinguished position," said Sister Magdalen. "The new superior must be quite old—"

"He is," broke in Sister Rosselin. "Didn't Mademoiselle Marie say he was in the thirties?"

The ingenuous observation drew smiles from many. "When one is in one's teens, the thirties seem old," laughed Sister Genevieve. "I think Cousin Marie mentioned that he had only been professed a short while."

"Then he's a young priest," said Sister Elizabeth, "just at the beginning of his life work, one might say."

"And they send a man like that to vegetate here," said Sister Magdalen. "That's a mystery, isn't it, Sister?" she remarked to the nun sitting next to her at the long table. She had taken no part in the general conversation and looked up, when addressed, with a startled air.

"I'm sorry, Sister, I didn't hear what you said. I'm afraid I wasn't paying much attention."

Sister Magdalen favored her with a look of amused surprise. How typical of Sister Alacoque, wool-gathering while such an interesting personality was being discussed. "We were talking about the new Jesuit superior. He's so distinguished, used to be at the court of the King in Paris and now they've sent him to this little jumping-off-place. Don't you think that's strange?"

Margaret Mary hesitated, as if groping for words. "Perhaps he is tired and needs a rest. Perhaps God wants him here for some reason." She hardly heard Sister Magdalen's crisp rejoinder. Evidently Sister Alacoque had not the slightest interest in Father de la Colombiere. The bell rang, marking the close of the recreation hour, and suddenly she was alive with animation. Her dark eyes were shining and her step was curiously light as she left the community room and hurried to the chapel.

Next day Mother de Saumaise announced to the community that Father de la Colombiere would hold a spiritual

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conference at the Visitation on February 15. It was to be a preparation for the Lenten Ember Days, early in March, when he would act as confessor extraordinary to the nuns. The conference would be their first opportunity to hear the gifted preacher and director of souls.

On the day of the conference the nuns filed into their stalls behind the grille on the epistle side of the chapel. The young Jesuit stood quietly on the altar steps. The religious observed a tall, slender man with pale oval face and high forehead. His hair was dark and his deep-set eyes, under sharply-defined brows, bore the look of fatigue. The more discerning noticed they were also the eyes of one who had suffered much.

Sister Margaret Mary took her usual place among the younger nuns. Only vaguely did she discern the priestly form on the other side of the grille. Her vision was directed beyond him to the tabernacle door. Then Father de la Colombiere began to speak, his words low and modulated as became the size of the place and the character of his listeners. His voice had the pleasing effect of soft, slow rhythmic music. It had the power to captivate and soothe. His gestures were in tune with that remarkable voice, they were graceful and eloquent. The smooth flow of his words revealed a deep knowledge of holy things, a sweet familiarity with the divine.

When he opened his mouth Sister Margaret Mary turned and looked at him. He said but a few sentences when suddenly his face blurred and she could no longer hear, for in her soul a powerful and compelling Voice, the Voice of the Beloved, cried in tremendous and sonorous tones, drowning out all else, "This is he, whom I have sent you." Then she was back again. The priest stood out clearly before her and, like her companions, she listened in rapt attention to his discourse.

Facing the grille, the Jesuit saw slight movements; heads

were raised and thrust forward, faint rustlings reached his ears. And then a strange occurrence took place. From the indistinguishable mass a single countenance stood out in perfect clarity. It was the most tragic face he had ever observed. The eyes were dark pools of unshed tears, the heavy, horizontal brows and generous mouth revealed depths of personality. This sad, forlorn being would have touched his heart under any circumstances but behind her features, under the quiet repose of her bearing, he sensed a burning and ardent spirit. So powerful was the impression that he could almost hear a voice crying from a wilderness of suffering. Though outwardly calm and detached, all during the conference he was conscious of her need.

When the service was over Father de la Colombiere repaired to the parlor, where he received the gracious thanks of the mother superior. She responded to his faultlessly kind manner, then seemed to delay his departure. Quite abruptly he asked: "Who was the young nun in the third stall from the end?"

Mother de Saumaise was astonished by the question. It had no connection with what had gone before. "Why, that was Sister Margaret Mary Alacoque," she answered, her voice expressing her surprise.

"That is a chosen soul," answered Father de la Colombiere and though the statement was made in almost a casual manner, there was an undertone of much emphasis. Mother de Saumaise was about to tell him something about Sister Alacoque, when he turned and left.

Very slowly, the mother superior walked back to her cell. The conference had been inspiring and edifying but she was not thinking about it. Her mind was concerned with that portentous expression, "a chosen soul." What manner of man, this new priest in Paray, that instantly he selected the very nun who had been her chief problem since she had become superior? How and why did he settle upon

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Sister Margaret Mary? It was enough to make one uneasy. Again, what manner of woman was Sister Margaret Mary who could, without opening her mouth draw his attention in such a dramatic and striking fashion?

Despite his ceaseless activities, the face of Sister Alacoque haunted Father de la Colombiere. The expression he had used to Mother de Saumaise, "a chosen soul," had rushed unbidden from his lips. Somehow he knew that he would meet Sister Margaret Mary, that it was the will of God their paths should cross and their lives be mingled to carry out some unknown but great purpose. Could this be the reason for his coming to Paray-le-Monial? He was a deeply spiritual man and extremely sensitive to holy atmospheres and moods. As confessor extraordinary to the Visitation nuns he would be back in a few weeks, during the Ember time, to hear confessions. Of course, it would be impossible to recognize Sister Margaret Mary's voice among the penitents, yet a strange impatience seized upon him. God was driving him onward and there was an urge in his heart to comply with the divine will. . . .

* * * *

It was dim in the confessional, where Father de la Colombiere sat, shriving the souls of the nuns. He was a careful and kind confessor; he knew how to cheer the disturbed of conscience, calm the scrupulous. He tried to inflame the sluggish and to increase the fervid in their efforts. His naturally keen mind was sharpened by much study and in a wise director, routine never dulls his delicate conscience.

Of a sudden, his heart quickened. Though this penitent had just asked his blessing, he was aware immediately that it was Sister Margaret Mary. Though her words were very brief, he could sense behind them great forces of love and holiness like rushing torrents held back by some formidable barrier. It was his duty to remove all restraint and let loose

the flood of grace. Gently, he began to question the penitent. She answered no more than the necessary, "Yes, Father," or "No, Father," in an almost inaudible murmur. Puzzled, yet impelled to draw her out, he persisted. Every attempt at encouragement was thwarted. She would reveal nothing. The confessor was keenly disappointed, for he could not realize the turmoil passing in her breast. Margaret Mary still suffered from her experience at the hands of the theologians and this questioning, though kindly, brought forcibly to her mind the harrowing interrogation when her ecstatic visions had been dismissed with incredulous derision. How recreant she felt at the time! And now this same emotion was sealing her lips, turning her away from the promised friend. She knew this was he, for even though they had never met, he spoke as if he understood the secrets of her soul.

And so Father Colombiere permitted her to go. The realization that he had failed left him with a sense of blank defeat. As for Margaret Mary, she was desolated. She accused herself bitterly for the cowardice that made her throw away a God-given opportunity. What must the Heart of Jesus feel? She had failed her Lord again and rebuffed His servant.

The new superior had pressing obligations, a series of missions in the surrounding towns, which kept him away from Paray-le-Monial until May. On his return, he found a note from Mother de Saumaise, asking him to call at the Visitation convent. She had something of importance to discuss with him. He knew at once that it concerned Sister Alacoque, improbable though the conjecture seemed. Perhaps this time he could do something to fulfil a sense of obligation which had followed him on his mission tour.

His intuition proved correct, for Mother de Saumaise plunged at once into the problem of Sister Alacoque. Father de la Colombiere noted the helplessness, almost de-

spair in the mother's voice as she poured out her story. The young woman was admitted to the convent four years before as a postulant. She was humble, pious and, while eager to obey, had upset the order of the entire convent—visions, mystic ecstasies, strange illnesses and strange recoveries had made her a constant cause of singularity and comment. Of course, Father de la Colombiere realized that all this was contrary to the Visitation rule. Sister Alacoque's actions violated continually the spirit of the Order.

Some of the older nuns had disapproved her profession. Many now believed that she was deranged and even treated her as though she were possessed by an evil spirit. Mother de Saumaise had never entertained any doubts of Sister Alacoque's sanity or sanctity but she could not accept her strange visions as authentic. She had called in a consultation of theologians. They had dismissed the poor sister as a foolish visionary and had paid no attention to her claims that she had been divinely inspired to receive Holy Communion on the First Friday of each month. In fact, they had advised Mother de Saumaise to forbid such an unprecedented practice.

Yet, the mother confessed, she was far from tranquil over Sister Alacoque. Some time before the consultation, she had insisted that the young nun make a written account of her interior life and revelations. It had impressed her profoundly. Perhaps Father de la Colombiere might read the account? And would he, perhaps, also talk with the sister? His spiritual direction would be an enormous help.

Father de la Colombiere had listened with the utmost attention to every word of the mother superior and his fine, sensitive face expressed sympathy as well as interest. He could understand now the reasons for Sister Alacoque's reticence in the confessional and his fatherly heart was touched. This time he would win the confidence of the tortured, repressed soul. God would give him the words to

unloose the heavy burden that oppressed her. He rose with a sudden, alert movement and spoke with characteristic directness. "I am going to the chapel, Reverend Mother. Kindly send the sister to the confessional."

When Sister Margaret Mary entered the little box, she experienced once more a paralyzing dread and, falling to her knees, she cried: "Father, I have a deep horror of laying bare my soul to you."

"Then I am glad, my daughter," came the unexpected rejoinder, "to be the means of enabling you to make this sacrifice to God."

Margaret Mary took a deep breath and the suffocating pounding of her heart grew still. She was no longer frightened and trembling. There on the other side of the veiled screen was the heaven-sent friend for whom she had such desperate need. His words were a challenge to self-immolation that broke down the barrier. Margaret Mary closed her eyes and bowed her head. Her folded hands were quiet on her breast. "Thank you, Father, I am ready."

"Then begin at the very beginning, my child, and tell me everything."

* * * *

The dark heliotrope of the fading twilight obscured the street as Father de la Colombiere walked the short distance to the Jesuit house. His eyes scarcely observed people or objects, for he was thinking deeply. He had had a great shock, only relieved by his deep, unquestioning faith. This was Paray, behind him was the convent of the Visitation nuns and in a few moments he would step inside the mellow lamplight of home, yet he seemed to be outside of himself, another person. There was a strange humming in his brain. It kept saying: now you know the reason you have come to Paray-le-Monial, over and over. He could not analyze his feelings but he wanted to keep walking

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on and on, past the friendly glow of his lighted windows, into the soft, declining dusk until he reached some remote and lonely monastery, where he might study, meditate and pray on the astounding things he had just heard from a troubled and unknown nun. Though he was almost at his door he felt as if he made a great and incredible journey, far into the heavens and back. How could he enter his home and meet the customary greetings of his brother priests? Surely his face and manner must be changed, for he had heard such miraculous disclosures from Sister Margaret Mary Alacoque that he could not ever be the same. Or could he? Would analytic study, the calm judicial process of reason and theological discipline, dissolve the awful yet beautiful images created in his mind? Did Jesus Christ really appear to a religious of the Visitation convent he had just left? Did He really desire that His Sacred Heart be worshipped—

He stopped in front of the Jesuit house. He was worn, too tired to think any more and suddenly aware that he was weak from lack of food. Now he was himself again, a very mundane human, no longer another self, scrutinizing his own soul. The Good God knew his frailty. With a sigh of content he went up the steps and opened the door. From the parlor he heard the sound of laughter and an unfamiliar voice, loud and strong. A visitor, perhaps one of the local clergy.

There was not one visitor but three, as Father de la Colombiere discovered when he joined them. He of the loud voice was the Benedictine, Francis. With pleasure, Father Colombiere saw the pastor of St. Nicholas, Eleoner Bouillet; he had liked this man from the moment he had laid eyes on him. Father Bouillet came of a noble family of Romay as his cultured manners bore witness. His dark blue eyes were bright and intelligent, ever shadowed by thick black brows which gave him a perpetually quizzical aspect.

He was slightly over middle-age with a ruddy, smiling face and greying hair. The other visitor was the simple Father Michon. Besides these guests were his Jesuit companions, Father Blaise Forest and Father Francois de la Bonnardiere, both old friends from his novice days at Avignon. Last of the group was Master Jean Carrat, a man almost seventy years old, who had never been ordained. He was one of those persons who are forever sick and live forever. The elderly scholastic had settled at Paray almost a quarter of a century before, quite content with his lot.

They seated themselves around the supper table. An air of genuine friendship and brotherly affection enveloped them. Father de la Colombiere experienced an inward glow of consolation; this gathering soothed his overwrought nerves. The flow of conversation was going along smoothly when Father Francois turned to Father Michon and inquired: "How does Sister Alacoque fare these days? I did the best I could for the poor deluded soul—recommended a substantial diet of good vegetable soup."

"The vegetable soup did not work," said the convent chaplain. "Poor young sister, I feel sorry for her. Some of the nuns throw holy water on her. Could it be that a devil afflicts her? When I was a boy we used to be afraid of a certain mountain glen. Devils lived there. I never saw one myself but my grandfather did. It was very red with a long spiked tail and horns. But I don't think a devil would like a convent."

There was some laughter at the chaplain's remarks, which were told in a serious manner. Vegetable soup and red devils—what nonsense, reflected de la Colombiere. So this was the verdict of the clergy.

Bouillet toyed with a piece of meat. His appetite was delicate. His long tapering fingers moved in graceful gestures. "I really wish something could be done for this afflicted religious. Her hallucinations must be quite extraor-

dinary, for I hear a great deal of idle talk about town concerning her. A great many good, simple, lay people have already canonized her. On the other hand, some consider her a lunatic. What troubles me more than anything is this story about the sisters casting holy water on her. They, my good Michon, are the ones who should be suspected of being possessed by the devils."

Michon wrinkled his brow. "Anyway the holy water won't hurt her. Poor soul, maybe she should be sent home."

"My dear fellow," broke in Father Francois, "don't you know that would be against the canon law? She is a professed nun. This whole business is ridiculous, silly nuns and ignorant peasants."

Dear God, thought de la Colombiere, how Sister Alacoque must have suffered. Her sad, troubled face appeared before him. Even the gentle Bouillet did not faintly understand her.

"There is no new revelation in the Church," stated the pastor of St. Nicholas. "Even the most stupid cleric knows this fact. The deposit of faith since the days of the Apostles remains the same. Anything else is heresy. And God knows, we've come on evil days with all the fantastic errors of the reformers."

Father Forest nodded in agreement. "Worse still this secret poison within the Church, Jansenism. That's the most dangerous heresy of all. It's like a blight."

"Damnable," thundered the Benedictine. "Even some of the nuns are affected. Thank God, however, we have none of it here in Paray. Sister Alacoque errs only on the pious side. If she were not such a delicate creature, I would suggest manual work, the good old Benedictine formula, *ora et labora*."

"Ah, but that has been tried," said Michon. "Poor soul, she can't work. Her mind is always on visions."

"Speaking of revelations," said Carrat, silent until now,

"I'm sure we all agree that the Church does not deny the validity of private revelations. The saints have had them and they have forwarded the work of the Church, increased piety and spread good works."

"Well spoken," de la Colombiere quietly commented. "Take, for example Saint Gertrude, your own great Benedictine mystic, Father Francois. Undoubtedly she had a revelation concerning the Sacred Heart which contained a prophecy that at some future time, when the world had grown cold, a new revelation would be made."

"But worshipping a heart," objected the Benedictine, "would be idolatrous."

"Granted, if you mean a heart of flesh separately and in itself," returned the Jesuit. "But the Heart of Jesus as part of His Sacred Humanity, the symbol of His Infinite love, ah, that is different."

When the meal was over and the guests had departed, Father de la Colombiere retired to his room. Exhausted in mind and body, he could not sleep. Had the world reached that point of deadly coldness predicted by Saint Gertrude, who had, like the Beloved Apostle, rested on the Master's breast and heard the measured beats of His Sacred Heart? Had those "later days" arrived when faith would be re-kindled by revelation of the mysteries of divine love? Was Sister Margaret Mary Alacoque linked with the medieval prophecy and was he, too, destined to become part of the tremendous plan?

“These Three Hearts”

XV

It was Pentecost Sunday, the second of June, the day a mixture of loveliness and magnificence. Great fluffy clouds of purest white flowed westward across the cobalt glory of the heavens. The sun was a golden ball laving the earth with light and warmth. In Paray-le-Monial the air was drenched with the sweetness of blossoming tree and bush. Bees droned lazily, replete with nectar as their tiny bodies winged their way from flower to flower.

There was an unusual flow of people in the narrow streets, all moving towards the Ursuline convent on the edge of the city. The occasion was the first public appearance of the celebrated Jesuit, Father de la Colombiere. Paray was honored in having such a great preacher for a

citizen but it was also curious to see what had made him great. The chapel was not spacious and long before the appointed time, it was filled. In the front pew sat Governor de Lionne and his sister, the beautiful, proud Mademoiselle Marie Rosalie, surrounded by her friends and admirers.

And now the expected hour came. The voices of the nuns' choir died away in soft, lingering notes. Father de la Colombiere took his place on the altar steps amidst expectant silence. "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a mighty wind coming—and there appeared to them parted tongues of fire."

The text was conventional, appropriate to Pentecost, but the congregation was suddenly aware why this Jesuit had become so well known. There were great depths of feeling in the modulated tones, as if the speaker actually heard the onrushing hurricane and saw the awful, vivid tongues of leaping fire. He was a man of passionate emotion with the power of imparting it. He had simplicity and its attendant quality, forgetfulness of self. In his flashing eyes and moving hands was revealed purpose. No wonder he had such a reputation!

The Jesuit was a finished orator, behind him a long list of brilliant discourses. He had preached before the mighty of the earth, before trained theologians and on all manner of subjects. Today, however, he knew that this sermon was different from all the others. His physical side was weary but in his mind was a rush of energy so strong and swift that it was an effort to hold back the copious flow of words. And besides this difference of degree from his usual pulpit eloquence, he was aware that there was also a difference of kind. The same strange detachment which he had experienced the night before returned and he seemed to be a two-fold person, his own self and another, standing aloof and watching. Strangely enough, this did not result in confusion.

It began with his mental picture of tongues of fire. Those

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leaping, twisting shapes changed their appearance and looked more like flaming hearts. The carefully worded, prepared speech dissolved and new phrases sprang unbidden to his lips. This was still a sermon on the Holy Spirit but he was thinking of the Sacred Heart of the Redeemer, Whose work was completed by the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity only after that Heart had emptied Itself.

From the expressions on the faces of his listeners, he knew that his words were affecting them in a most unusual way. Then all the faces seemed to blur together and he saw only one. It was a sad face with mournful eyes, a beautiful face of infinite compassion. It was the face of one who had suffered and loved and held communion with the divine. It was the face of the Visitation nun, Margaret Mary Alacoque.

Never had such a sermon been preached in Paray-le-Monial. After the first astonishment and when the spell of his words was loosened, all manner of praise was bestowed upon the preacher. His reputation, they now realized, was merited to a far greater degree than had been expected. Here was a man of genius as well as an exceptional religious leader.

During the next few days Father de la Colombiere had several conferences with Sister Margaret Mary. Often he was convinced indeed that "this was the acceptable time, this the day of salvation" when Saint Gertrude's prediction was to be fulfilled. Yet he recoiled from the idea that he was to play a part. Humble and sincere, like all great souls, his doubts revolved around himself. Why did God select him to direct this chosen soul when there were so many more worthy and capable priests available? By every sign, she was a holy person. He had tested her with the proven methods of the skilled religious director and knew her to be humble, sincere and obedient.

One day as he walked along the street, a queer and almost

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blasphemous fancy flashed across his troubled and puzzled mind. "If I were God, I would have selected this nun as the means of spreading devotion to the Sacred Heart." Yes, this much was true, in all his life the Jesuit had never met such an exalted character. Where could he find anyone more loving, more refined by suffering than Sister Margaret Mary? "I am almost convinced—almost," he said to himself, "but the part which is so disconcerting is—myself. Why should I, Claude de la Colombiere, a most unworthy soul, save for God's grace and mercy, be the confidant of a saint? Why share in the revelation of unutterable mysteries? No, it cannot be. Yet I am urged on by a powerful force which never lets me rest, either by day or night."

The June days slipped by. It was Corpus Christi, which came that year of 1675 on the thirteenth. Father de la Colombiere said Mass on the feast at the Visitation convent and gave the nuns Communion. Always on this day dedicated to the Holy Eucharist he felt a special warmth of devotion, for his love for the Blessed Sacrament was intense. Today the feeling was deeper, more inspired than he had ever experienced. The Divine Presence sweetly enfolded Him, filling his whole being with a new glow of rapture and benediction.

The consecration was over, the miracle of transubstantiation had been enacted, the bread and wine had become the Body and Blood of Christ. Now it was Communion and, going to the grille, he began to distribute the Hosts. As he placed the Sacred Particle on Sister Margaret Mary's tongue, he was suddenly aware in some mysterious manner that she was being elevated out of this earthly plane, that her soul was seeing a vision and that he was part of that visioning. For a fleeting second he was caught up in this heavenly involvement and a grateful humility came over him. He had been close to the Divine. It had brushed by him and somehow, like the poor woman of the Gospel,

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he had touched the hem of the Nazarene's garment.

He was not surprised when he found the sister waiting for him after the Mass. There was a confidence in her manner which he had never observed before.

"He told me to speak to you without fear," she said. Father de la Colombiere's heart quickened, for this was the first time she had given him a direct message concerning himself. Silently, he listened while she described what had passed within her soul when she had received Holy Communion. "He showed me His Sacred Heart like a glowing furnace, together with two other hearts drawing near and ready to plunge into It, and He said: 'It is thus that My pure love unites these three hearts forever.'"

She paused for a moment, for she knew that it was not necessary to tell him that the two hearts consumed by the spiritual fire were her own and his. In humility and gratitude he waited while she continued, "And He made me understand that this union was for the glory of His Sacred Heart. He desired me to make known its treasures to you, Father, that you might publish abroad their priceless worth. And for this purpose, we were to be partners."

She hesitated for a moment as if unable or unwilling to say more. The priest remained silent but his eyes, which had never left her face, spoke encouragement. At last she turned to him and, with an almost apologetic gesture, ended in a little rush of words. "I represented to Him my poverty and the difference there was between a man of great virtue and merit and a poor wretched sinner like myself. And then He said to me: 'The infinite riches of My Heart will fill up and equalize everything, only speak to him fearlessly.' Now I have obeyed him."

All uncertainty was ended for Father de la Colombiere. He had been given a direct command, so plain, so unmistakable that he could no longer doubt nor delay. Yes, the incredible was true. God had chosen this humble Visitation

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nun as the channel for His infinite compassion and he, Claude de la Colombiere, was to be the messenger of her revelations. Now and forever they were bound by and through the Sacred Heart. Theirs the privilege of casting Its fire on the earth, heavenly fire to dissolve the ice of indifference and hate in the hearts of man.

That same day he advised Mother de Saumaise, in the presence of Sister Margaret Mary, that he had arrived at his decision regarding the validity of her visions. He was placing the seal of approval upon all she had told him, for he was now convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that God was guiding and inspiring her. It was an amazing decision, yet the superior accepted his priestly verdict without surprise or incredulity. Rather, she seemed relieved and pleased. Her eyes met the young nun's and she smiled and slightly nodded her head. Sister Margaret Mary's face broke into a radiant smile. Truly, the Lord had given her a tower of strength in Father de la Colombiere, His faithful servant! Already he had dispelled the doubts of her dear Mother de Saumaise, whose opinion meant so much. She was confident now that together they would advance the cause of the Sacred Heart in an ever widening circle of believers.

During the days that followed Margaret Mary poured forth her gratitude to the Divine Master. Soon, very soon, she felt that He would again come to her to perfect His design of drawing souls to Him. When this great moment would arrive she could not exactly say. Her days and nights were spent in waiting. The flame which He had implanted in her heart became a burning point of pain, a curious anguish of desire, which was at the same time so great a joy that it was almost unbearable. She would not, nor did she try in even the slightest manner, to force this blessed realization. Hour after hour passed as she knelt, waiting the summons, before the Blessed Sacrament, her pale face

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pressed against the grille, her soft eyes fastened with a celestial glow on the door of the Tabernacle. . . .

* * * *

It is still the octave of Corpus Christi and the devotions in the convent center around Christ's Mystical Body hidden in the Immaculate Host, enthroned in the golden monstrance. The nuns chant hymns of adoration, the chaplain and other priests bless them with their Eucharistic God. It is also their privilege to have an extra Mass on these octave days. There are good souls, holy souls among this congregation of nuns but none can approach the chosen soul of Sister Margaret Mary. Now that she is free to seek her Lord in her own way, her heart is overflowing with joy. The sisters wonder how she can remain so long, so erect, so still in the chapel. But for her there is no time element, for she has reached such heights of sanctity that time has become a sort of eternity.

It is Sunday afternoon and the Blessed Sacrament is exposed on the altar. Margaret Mary is kneeling in her accustomed place, close to the grille. A radiant glow begins creeping over her. It is like a warm, cheerful fire suddenly discovered in a cold and dreary field. Yes, the great moment has come and, like a tired and freezing outcast, she abandons herself to its enveloping warmth.

There is a change in the chapel, everything seems to be suffused with a roseate light, so soft and yet so sparkling with beauty that it surpasses anything the human eye has ever seen. The atmosphere deepens, takes on the richness of the sky at sunset, only infinitely more magnificent and enthralling. Margaret Mary's body is forgotten as the warmth pervades her soul and she hears the music of another world, of Cherubim and Seraphim chanting the praises of God.

And then appears her Beloved Jesus. He does not speak

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but His compassionate eyes look into hers. These are the eyes which looked with such understanding pity upon the stricken widow of Naim. These are the eyes which wept over the doomed city of Jerusalem. Now they become misty as if He would weep again over the lost sons and daughters of men. He reveals His Heart to her, she hears Him speak. "Behold this Heart, which has loved men so much, even to suffering and death, to show them Its love. . . . And in return I receive for the most part nothing but ingratitude because of the contempt, irreverence, sacrilege, and coldness which they have for Me in this Sacrament of Love."

Margaret Mary comprehends that the Eucharist and the Heart of Jesus are one, that the Living, Loving Christ of the Tabernacle makes Himself helpless before the fury of the unbelievers and the wretched ingratitude of those who bear the name Christian. In the Host is the pleading Heart which forever entreats men to bring Him their sorrows and burdens. As He was outraged in His life upon the earth, so now He is outraged in His Eucharistic life of the altar. The final stroke of the heretic is to destroy all belief in the miracle of the Blessed Sacrament. Thus the love which impelled Jesus to remain until the end of time is perpetually reviled and spit upon as on the road to Calvary.

If only she could make reparation, gladly would she expire in the tortured death of a martyr to accomplish this loving sacrifice. He speaks again and His words are an answer to her wish, for He is telling her now what He wants to be done in reparation. No heroic martyrdom, no ordeal beyond the reach of humankind is exacted by the Divine Heart, for all It seeks is love for love. Accordingly He asks that a feast of the Church be established to honor His Sacred Heart. And this annual observance is to be kept on the Friday after the octave of Corpus Christi by communicating and by making a solemn act of reparation for

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the indignities received by the Divine Heart during the time It is exposed on the altar.

This is the third and last great apparition of the Sacred Heart. Its secrets of love and longing are laid bare and now, before the vision fades, Jesus makes a promise to His faithful disciple and through her to all the children of men: "I promise you My Heart shall expand itself to shed in abundance the influence of Its divine love upon all who shall thus honor It and cause It to be honored." The soft, dulcet notes of that sublime and infinite blessing sing in Margaret Mary's heart like a comforting hymn.

"Oh, yes, yes, Dearly Beloved, I am eager to do your bidding, for it is a long time now since you first revealed to me the desires of your Sacred Heart and as yet I have accomplished nothing. I do not know how to begin. I am so unworthy—"

He stays her with a gentle wave of the hand. Has she forgotten that He has sent her His servant for the accomplishment of this design? She need only tell him. . . .

The Voice is still. Jesus lifts His arms in benediction. It is the signal for parting but before she returns to the finite world, she sees the Divine Heart expanding into an immensity of fire and hears again and again the wistful cry of the God-Man: "Behold this Heart, which has loved men so much. . . ." "Behold this Heart, which has loved men so much. . . ."

* * * *

When Margaret Mary regained consciousness her eyes were streaming with tears but the dazed incoherence and bodily turmoils she had experienced after her earlier ecstasies were absent. This time she became quite normal after a brief period and her first act was to communicate with Father de la Colombiere, who instructed her to write out for him a complete account of the third revelation.

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Comparing this final revelation with Sister Margaret Mary's written account of the two earlier revelations, the Jesuit found that they contained all that was needed for the establishment of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It was to be a devotion of love and reparation. Its principal end would be the conversion of souls to the love of Jesus for men, revealed as a despised, ignored and outraged love. It was to be a reciprocation of love by which the Sacred Heart, the symbol of Our Lord's boundless love for humanity, would bring about His rule over the hearts of mankind. The method by which this divine aim would be accomplished was a series of practical, solid acts of devotion: Communion on the First Friday of every month, observance of the Holy Hour in memory of the Passion, the establishment of a day of reparation, the Feast of the Sacred Heart, to be observed on the Friday after the octave of Corpus Christi.

Accordingly, on the following Friday, June 21, 1675, the first Feast of the Sacred Heart was observed by its two disciples, kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament in the Visitation chapel of Paray-le-Monial. Co-heirs of the treasures of the Sacred Heart, their spiritual partnership was to last for the remainder of their lives, although the parts which they were to play were so divergent. She was the medium through which the Divine Heart revealed Itself; he was to inaugurate and propagate the devotion to It.

Love, good will, can accomplish the impossible. With this psychological and spiritual fact the Jesuit Father was familiar. The lives of the great dead proved it. Yet how was he to promote this devotion in the sluggish, rural setting of Paray-le-Monial? Did not Peter go to Rome, the center of pagan civilization to cast the seed of Christianity to the four corners of the world from that advantageous point? God would show him the road—his eager desire needed no urging, but when, where—ah, that again was God's business.

"Behold This Heart"

And what of Sister Margaret Mary, she through whom came the revelation of the Sacred Heart? As a cloistered nun it was only logical to presume that she would remain in the convent until the end of her days, perhaps in this very convent of Paray-le-Monial. Indeed, it would seem that she must stay in Paray-le-Monial. Was she not the keeper of the shrine? The Visitation chapel where Our Lord imparted to her the secrets of His burning love for man would be always from now on a sacred spot. Yes, all his thinking made Claude de la Colombiere certain that she would never leave this place. As the divinely-appointed partner, there seemed no other possibility.

His mind centered on the new devotion, his soul stirred with great emotion, the Jesuit walked the streets of the little town. "How can I begin to spread this new creation of Calvary's love? Does not God expect me to do something at once, for His love brooks no delay? Am I already somewhat delinquent? Ah, if I were only back in Paris at the court, in the palace of the King among the great persons of the world." For Paris under Louis XIV was the supreme city of civilization. He realized, of course, that the opposition would be tremendous but he was ready to suffer, even to die. It was not unseemly that, in the spreading of this devotion, he should die the death of a martyr. Had not the propagation of the Church been built on martyrs' blood? Yet, it was far-fetched, indeed, to think such thoughts—no one would want to kill him in bucolic Paray-le-Monial.

* * * *

Claude de la Colombiere could not see his future but as he tried to look ahead, others were already deciding that future. In the Jesuit College at Lyons two priests sat facing each other across the table. One was the superior, the other the oldest priest in the province, Father de LaCourtois.

"These Three Hearts"

There was a quiet solemnity about them, as if a decision of great importance impended.

Father de LaCourtois spoke first. "I am sure, dear Father, that my advice would be of no moment. It is some years now since I have mingled in the world. I have not long to go and—"

The superior waved a hand of protest. "It is just because of your age that I called you in to help me. This matter is of the utmost gravity to the Order, the wrong choice would be fatal. Affairs in England are very, very bad. The Church is persecuted, everything points to disaster. Now we have the opportunity to appoint a chaplain to Mary of Modena, Duchess of York and sister-in-law to His Majesty. He would have diplomatic immunity and the possibility of influencing not only England's leaders but Charles II. Should Charles die, the Duke would succeed to the throne."

The superior's strong, resonant voice was eloquent. He was a corpulent Frenchman with ruddy skin and brave, fierce eyes. Had he not embraced the religious life, he might well have been a soldier. His naturally sanguine, tempestuous nature had been calmed and controlled by his life as a Jesuit. His energies were solely directed to the spreading and maintaining of the Faith.

The old priest spoke. "Ah, kings and queens! Once I was their familiar. They hold the destinies of nations and men, war and famine. I would rather be a simple plowman."

"But you never were a simple plowman," objected the superior with a smile. "You are of the noble blood. A large part of your life has been spent among the mighty. You are wise with the wisdom of experience. You know better than I the kind of man we want at England's throne. Now here are the names of three and I've jotted down their qualifications. I've decided on one but I shall not tell you who he is. I want your opinion."

Father de LaCourtois glanced over the three cards. He

hesitated only a few moments. "How about Claude de la Colombiere? He has had experience in Paris and I know he is intelligent and holy."

The superior's face brightened. "The very man I had selected."

Father de LaCourtois was quite at ease now that his choice coincided with the superior's. "By the way, where is Father de la Colombiere now?" he inquired. "I lose track of the young clergy at my time of life."

"He's at a little mission in Paray-le-Monial in the Charollais country in Burgundy."

"Ah, yes, the Charollais," murmured Father de LaCourtois and his eyes took on a dreamy, brooding look. Like most old men his memories were sometimes stronger than the present. "I remember it was perhaps twenty-five years ago in a remote little place—an apple orchard. There was an old chateau, an ancient chapel, bees and birds and the scent of growing things. I met a priest there, one of those rural types—no man of books but very pious. And there was a little child, a girl. She had a beautiful face. I think she was the most remarkable human I ever met—I, who had looked into the eyes of kings and queens, saints and sinners. Those childish eyes saw beyond things. I remember she was making a vow of chastity before the tabernacle, though she knew not the meaning of the word. I wonder what became of her."

"Probably an obscure nun in some little convent," replied the superior.

The old priest's face showed keen disappointment. "But I thought she was destined to play a great role. Her name was Alacoque, Margaret Alacoque."

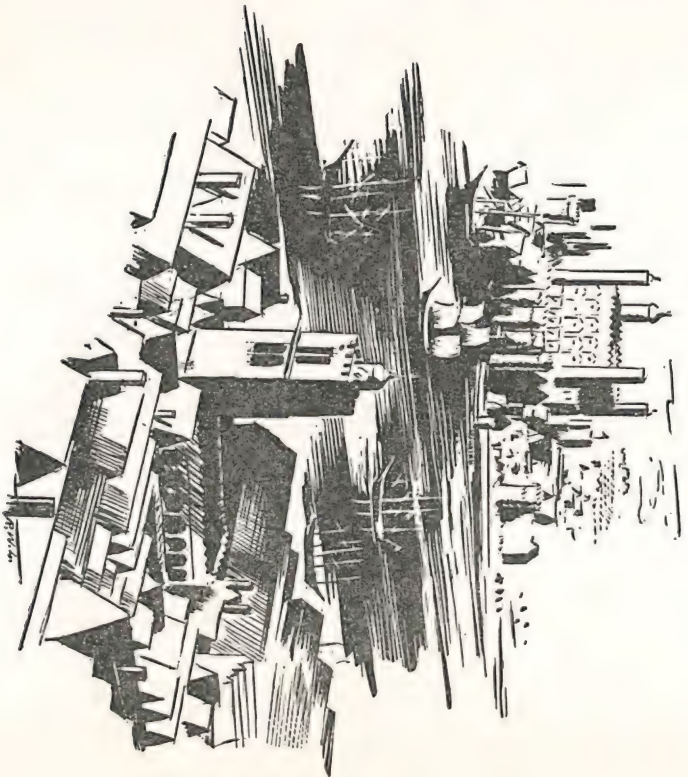
"Perhaps she has," said the superior. "The prayers of the unknown, I often think, have saved countless souls."

"That's a nice thought," said Father de LaCourtois. "She was a lovely child."

"These Three Hearts"

The superior took up his quill. He was preparing to write to Father de la Colombiere to advise him of his new post. Father de LaCourtois went back to his room to dream about the orchard in Burgundy and the child, Margaret. It was his favorite memory.

Mission to England



London

XVI

Claude de la Colombiere sank back in his chair. On the hearth the coal fire winked and glowed like a huge jewel. Outside a fierce wind beat on the window panes. He was very fatigued after the rough trip from Dover in weather which searched to the marrow of his bones. His eyes were aching for he had just finished the breviary in the jolting coach which had swayed like a drunken man over the frozen, rutty roads. England had given him a harsh welcome, snow, ice and furious gales.

It was a relief to be at the end of his journey. He stretched his long legs covered by riding boots which he still left on, though the servant had offered to remove them. He had demurred also to the glass of steaming mulled beer.

Claude was an ascetic by nature, a pampered body could not produce the spiritual man.

Gradually his stiff, chilled body relaxed. He took off the sombre but fine garments in which he was clothed, smiling regretfully as he hung up the lay attire, for here in England with its bitter hatred of everything Catholic, a priest dared not dress as became his holy office. "I'm doubly, nay triply damned," he reflected, "not only a priest and a Jesuit, but a Frenchman besides."

He put on a dressing gown and sat down near the fire. The future was uncertain, the task imposed almost fanatical. Yet here he was in one of the innumerable rooms of St. James Palace on the threshold of adventure. Ostensibly, he had been appointed preacher to her Royal Highness, Mary of Modena, Italian-born wife of the Duke of York, but the real purpose behind this move was the conversion of King Charles II and by that stroke the destiny of England would be transformed; from a nation of heretics and pagans would arise the ancient glorious realm of Merrie England, Mary's England.

It was very still in the room, only the wind howling outside disturbed the silence but to Claude, sitting with bent head before the ruby flames of the hearth, there was a derisive note in the fury of the gale. Versed in the manners of royal courts, he knew politicians and his knowledge made him skeptical of the motives behind Louis Fourteenth's desire for the restoration of Catholicism to a mighty nation. Was the royal plan as sincere and noble as it appeared or was it the mad scheme of a king who stopped at nothing to attain his objective? There was no limit to the ambitions of the little man in the gardens of Versailles, who had become the greatest ruler in Europe, who had made Paris the wonder of all cities and France the land of the golden age. Rightly might Louis be called the Grand Monarch but his private life, with its disgusting, brazen

immoralities, was revolting and the English ruler was no better.

Considerations such as these inspired distaste and doubt in the mind of the religious, who, according to his own estimate, was the last man fitted for such an undertaking. Only obedience to his superiors and the conviction that God's will could achieve the impossible had caused him to accept this crown of thorns. He had arrived at the gates of destiny but reason could not cast its clear radiance to show him the way and Father de la Colombiere knew that he must rely on spiritual instinct to guide him.

He opened his eyes with a start and smiled ruefully, for he had fallen asleep from weariness, despite the turmoil of his thoughts. The servant was bringing in the dinner, a heavy repast of boiled mutton and suet pudding. Englishmen must have stout stomachs, thought Claude, as he nibbled at the meat. And then the huge flagon of mulled beer, which he would not, could not, touch.

His worn body still clamored for rest when he pushed aside the untasted dessert as the servant announced the arrival of the Honorable Edward Coleman, secretary of the Duchess of York. Claude rose to greet the visitor. In Paris he had been warned against the man. Though holding a post of authority and a sincere champion of the cause of Catholicity, he was singularly indiscreet, his tongue forever wagging and still worse, his pen never idle.

"Ah, Father de la Colombiere, I am delighted to see you. I have just been advised of your arrival and hasten to greet you."

He sat down and accepted the mulled beer which he tossed off with relish. Claude winced inwardly. What an abominable drink and what strange people, the English! "I trust you found everything satisfactory," went on the secretary, his glance straying over the untouched food.

"I am too tired to be hungry," said the Jesuit tactfully.

"I must not keep you from your much-needed rest, dear father," said Coleman. "I have a message from the Duchess. She sends her greetings and good wishes and begs that you delay your audience with her until you have a night's sleep."

"Most thoughtful of Her Grace," murmured the priest gratefully.

Coleman rose to go then suddenly sat down again and whispered mysteriously. "Be very careful, Father. Even the walls have ears and every word you say will be echoed. As for letters, you must send them by diplomatic pouch of the French Ambassador or better, by some trusted person. These are difficult and dangerous days."

Father de la Colombiere restrained an amused smile. How illogical for a rash individual like Coleman to be urging caution. But that was human, for people never saw their own failings. "The time is coming, Father," went on the secretary volubly, "when the people of England will rise *en masse*. Except for a few scheming blackguards, the nation would rejoice to see Charles return to the ancient faith of England's kings. See how quickly England restored the Stuarts. She was tired of the stiff-necked Cromwellites. The people love Charles. He is a great king despite his faults and vices. I have my finger on the political pulse and wherever I go I feel the rising pressure like a flood which can no longer be stemmed. When the moment arrives the torrent will spill over and sweep the heretics from power."

"I hope you are correct, Mr. Coleman," said Claude.

Again the secretary rose to go and again he paused for a final admonition. "Don't judge the solid belief of the country by London, which is crammed with dissenters and accursed notaries. The House of Lords still has many adherents of the old Faith but the Commons—that's different. They destroyed England's greatness by refusing to give Charles money for a navy, the blind, bigoted fools."

In the morning Father de la Colombiere had time to re-

flect on the conversation or rather the explosive outbursts of last night's visitor. Had he not been guided by the advice of his predecessor, back in Paris, he might be feeling very hopeful but he could not put too much faith in Coleman's optimism.

Ice still clung to the windows of his apartment and the acrid smell of channel coal made him cough and sneeze. What veritable prodigies these British, to survive in such a climate where Arctic cold brought freezing weather in mid-autumn, for November had not yet arrived.

Today would be busy with a series of conferences, first the Duchess, then the French Ambassador, finally the Jesuit provincial. He shrank from the thought of the whole business. He might meet pleasant people but all his activities must be motivated by the plan for the conversion of the king and he wished profoundly that the task devolved on someone more adapted to it. What he wanted to do above all else was spread devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. But how could he? His mind was torn and distracted.

As he turned to follow the little page who came to conduct him to the Duchess, he suddenly had a happy inspiration. Perhaps it had floated from faraway Paray-le-Monial in Burgundy, from the quiet convent of the Visitation there and Sister Margaret Mary, kneeling before the tabernacle. Claude found himself thinking that he could combine the conversion of the king with spreading the doctrine of the Sacred Heart. God did things which seemed incomprehensible and it might well be God's holy will to initiate the devotion in a foreign and heretical land. The sheets of ice on the window panes suddenly flamed with brightness, the sun had just come out. Claude smiled, for it seemed a good omen.

Mary of Modena was a beautiful young woman of eighteen but her face in repose had a haunted, tragic look and her dark luminous eyes were shadowed. Claude knew her

unusual history, a princess who had rejected worldly glory and wealth and had elected, at fifteen, to become a Visitation nun. Yet in obedience to the will of the Holy Father, she had put aside her own wishes and married a man twenty-five years her senior, the brother of England's king. Strange fate for the little Italian princess, but she had made this great sacrifice to help the cause of the Church. And having made it, she did not repine nor was her ardent spirit crushed, for Mary of Modena was no ordinary woman but a superior soul. She was a faithful, devoted wife and mother and a spiritual force to be reckoned with. Only a month before she had given birth to her second child, a daughter like the first, which had died in infancy. Her step-daughters, the Princess Mary, fourteen, and the Princess Anne, who was eleven, loved her as dearly as if she were their own mother.

She welcomed Father de la Colombiere with sincere and heartening cordiality. Even in this, their first interview, he recognized her piety and virtue. On her part, the Duchess was deeply impressed by the evident sanctity of the new chaplain and enchanted by his conversation. It was added pleasure to talk freely in the melodious French tongue, for although she had acquired a speaking knowledge of English, it seemed to her an outlandish and wholly illogical language.

They made plans for the services which he would conduct in the Chapel Royal. Claude's daily Mass would be said in a small private oratory adjoining his bedchamber. The Duchess herself conducted him to her chapel, a large chamber easily accessible to her own and the Duke's apartments. It was located in the east wing of the palace and opened on a corridor which led to the main gate of the palace. "Ours is a private chapel, Father," she explained, "a fortunate thing for the English Catholics, since they

would not be permitted to attend Mass here, if it were classified as public."

After his interview with the Duchess, Father de la Colombiere walked the short distance from the palace to the French Embassy at the corner of St. James' Square. His superior, Father Bedingfield, who was also chaplain to the Duke of York, made his headquarters there and Claude was shown immediately into his study. As he entered, a tall, white-haired man with great calm blue eyes rose to greet him. Claude had never met Father Bedingfield but was familiar with the career of this dauntless man of God. In constant danger of death, as were all English priests who dared discharge the duties of their calling in those perilous days, he was known by four different names and as many disguises. As a matter of fact, Bedingfield was his mother's maiden name and he was really Thomas Downes, member of an old and honorable Catholic royalist family of Norfolk. He enjoyed a reputation for exceptional gallantry which he won while serving as chaplain on the Duke's flagship when James was Lord High Admiral of the English Navy. Often he had exposed himself to heavy enemy gunfire while ministering to the wounded. There was one memorable encounter between the English and Dutch fleets when the Duke's flagship had been shot from under him three times but the intrepid Jesuit had continued to administer the last rites to the dying without the slightest regard for his own safety. It was experiences such as these which bound them in lasting friendship and mutual esteem.

"I'm glad you're here, my friend," said Claude's new superior, seizing his hand in a warm clasp. "Sit down. I have much to tell you but we must be careful."

Claude looked deep into his eyes, for he had been advised before leaving Paris that Father Bedingfield was the only person in England who knew the real purpose of his

coming. "Thank you, father. I understand and I shall rely upon your invaluable aid."

The other returned his glance with perfect comprehension.

"Count on me to do what I can, but first let me warn you that yours is a most difficult and dangerous undertaking, requiring the utmost secrecy and discretion. Should the slightest premature inkling become known, our enemies would seize upon it to accuse our Order of high treason."

"I realize that," answered Claude gravely. "Under your penal laws any priest found converting anyone to the Catholic faith is condemned to death. And yet the three people nearest the King are staunch Catholics, the Queen and the Duke and Duchess of York. And the King, I understand, is a Catholic at heart."

"Charles has not the moral courage of his brother," said Father Bedingfield. "He will do nothing to risk losing his crown—or his head. How nobly different the Duke! After his conversion he resigned from the Admiralty when the Test Act was passed rather than deny his Faith. I haven't a doubt that the King is intellectually convinced of the truth of the Catholic religion but that does not prevent him from forcing James to rear his children as Protestants, although their mother died a Catholic."

Claude was impressed by the straightforward sincerity of the English Jesuit and felt an immediate attraction for him. Unlike the babbling Coleman, his judgment was sound and his vision clear. There was no false optimism in Father Bedingfield's statements, he had made no attempt to dissemble his views on the conversion of England's monarch. "I hope I have not discouraged you," he told Claude as they prepared to join the French Ambassador. "With God's help anything is possible."

"But you are dubious of the whole business, aren't you?" asked Claude with characteristic directness.

"Candidly, Father," murmured Father Bedingfield, "I think it would take a miracle to accomplish your objective."

They entered the beautiful reception room of the Embassy and Monsieur Honore de Courtin came to meet them with a smile lighting up his dark countenance. "Please make yourselves comfortable," he began. "And now Father de la Colombiere, I shall try to give you a brief picture of the situation here in England. First you are a Frenchman, that is very bad; secondly a priest, which is worse; and a Jesuit—that is the last word in infamy."

Claude could not help but smile at the ambassador's vehemence. He was an odd but attractive man, a curious mixture of complacency and enthusiasm but Claude sensed his talent for this high and delicate post. The times were explosive, a single word spoken at the wrong moment might bring on disaster. In Monsieur de Courtin, the King of France had an able diplomat, shrewd, intelligent and with an engaging manner.

For over an hour they discussed the dangerous position of the Catholic faith in England. "There are in round numbers a half million people in London," said the ambassador, "and one-eighth are Catholics but that's counting a goodly number of French, Spanish and Portuguese. Do not let your zeal run away with you, Father. Remember the awful penal laws."

Claude was told what he already knew that no English subject was permitted to take part in Catholic worship publicly but only in private houses and chapels, that any layman found converting anyone to the Catholic faith was punished by confiscation of two-thirds his possessions. "And now there is a new enforcement," added de Courtin. "Guards are being placed at all public chapels—even the Queen's, mind you—to arrest any Englishman found leaving them."

How fantastic and ridiculous Coleman's glowing picture

"Behold This Heart"

in the light of what he had learned in these interviews, reflected Claude as he returned to the palace. The ancient faith was fast being blotted out in this former stronghold of the saints. Yet even in these last decades the Church in England could still number her martyrs, brother Jesuits like the great Campion, who accepted death rather than betray their Master. It was an inspiring thought to brighten the dark prospect of bigotry and persecution. They had not died in vain, for their spirit lived on in the faithful few who were prepared to sacrifice their all to keep the seed of Faith alive in England.

It seemed a happy augury that Claude's first sermon was preached on the Feast of All Saints, a day of rejoicing throughout the Christian world. The Chapel Royal was crowded beyond capacity as Father de la Colombiere stood before the altar. For a moment he was silent, motionless, while the mood of his congregation rose up and enveloped him. Like all great orators he was sensitive to this curious mass psychology and now he felt an almost tangible atmosphere of friendliness. His listeners were French, exiles like himself. They had been deprived of the word of God for a long time and their souls reached out to him in a sympathetic response that was warm as a handclasp.

His rich, sweet voice swept into the hearts of his countrymen, his words poured forth in generous waves of emotion as his discourse progressed from thoughts of God's blessed multitudes of saints to the source of all sanctity, the Divine Heart of the Saviour. He told them of that Wounded Heart which loved men so dearly, of that Neglected Heart which so patiently awaited their coming. Now more than ever the world needed the Sacred Heart and England, once Catholic England, more than all.

When he finished a strange silence, like a great hush, pervaded the chapel. He had made an extraordinary impression and his listeners were still caught up in the spell of his

words. On his own part, Father de la Colombiere was deeply moved. The devotion of that hour, the feeling of kinship clung to him like the pleasing odor of incense in a church long after Benediction. A new hope surged through him, born of the conviction that his first preaching concerning the Sacred Heart in this alien land had fallen upon good ground.

A few days later Claude walked briskly along the London streets. The sun was shining with brilliance on the ice-covered city, trees and shrubs were coated with glittering diamonds of frost. He threw back his shoulders and breathed in the clear, cold air. He was still in an optimistic mood. Soon he must meet the King, must endeavor to the utmost of his capability to win Charles. Perhaps from Paray-le-Monial and the Disciple of the Sacred Heart would come a mystical communication to inspire and guide him. With God all things were possible. And Claude thought of Peter, the Nazarene fisherman, and Paul, a tent-maker from Tarsus, who dared invade the citadel of pagan Rome and there establish the Church of Christ.

As Claude walked from the fashionable west-end district into the more congested section of downtown London he noticed an unusual stir and bustle, like a festival. People were dressed in their Sunday best; little crowds were standing at corners, laughing and calling to passers-by. Bands of boys marched through the streets, shouting and singing. Claude wished that he could understand English better, wondering what holiday this might be. He had begun the study of the language before leaving France but since coming to London had conversed mainly in his native tongue. It was most agreeable to find that Englishmen like Father Bedingfield and Coleman could speak French fluently but Claude was eager to learn English for he wanted to reach the poor—God's poor—to be able to speak with them and understand their needs. He was on his way now to one of

the worst parts of Westminster, heading in the opposite direction to the crowd which seemed to be converging towards some central point.

As he turned a corner of a poor street Claude almost collided with a little girl, who was running away from several older boys. She was sobbing and clutching a half-grown cat in her arms. "Do not cry, little one," said the priest in his halting English. "I shall not let the bad boys take your pet."

The child clung to him and cried all the louder. "But they'll get poor Peterkin as soon as you go away. And when they do they'll burn him alive."

"But no, chérie," answered Claude soothingly. "They could not be so cruel." He turned to the sullen-looking boys, who were standing nearby. "Go away, boys. You should not tease her so."

"Who's teasin'," retorted the largest boy. "Don't you know what day this is, mister? We wants the bloomin' cat to celebrate with."

Claude was mystified but the ugly leers on the boys' faces and the little girl's terrified distress boded ill for Peterkin. "I do not care what day this is," said the priest in a sterner tone, "you must not annoy this little girl or harm her cat. Now be off, all of you."

The boys stood their ground and scowled belligerently. "He never heard of Guy Fawkes Day," remarked the leader, wagging his head towards Claude insolently.

"He's a foreigner, that's why," said another. "Can't you tell by his talk?"

"Then he's a Papist," shrieked the smallest of the lot.

"A Papist, a bloody Papist," cried the fourth boy, picking up a stone and hurling it at Claude. It missed but the others followed with a shower of sticks and stones. Claude was struck and blood flowed from a gash in his forehead. "That'll learn you not to interfere," cried the leader with

a vile oath. He jumped at the screaming child and would have torn the cat from her hands before Claude could recover himself were it not for a man on the street. Where he had come from Claude failed to notice but suddenly he was in the middle of the young ruffians, whacking them with a dangerous-looking piece of firewood. Howls of pain took the place of vicious threats. "Move on, loafers, before I call the watch," cried Claude's rescuer, flourishing his weapon as the attackers skulked away. Claude turned to him in grateful relief. "Thank you, my friend, thank you."

"You are hurt, sir," said the stranger with great concern. "Let me take you—"

"It's a scratch," interrupted Claude with a smile. "My chief worry now is to see that this poor child and her cat get home safely."

The man lifted the little girl in his arms, Peterkin and all. "Let me go with you," he said. "Perhaps I know my way about these streets better than you."

"That will be most kind," replied the priest. "But how could you tell that I do not belong here?"

The other smiled and Claude noticed that he was quite young, scarcely more than a boy, but his weazened face was pinched and lined, his clothes threadbare and miserably inadequate for the winter cold. He shrugged a shoulder and to Claude's complete surprise answered in French: "I knew at once that you were a Frenchman. My name is Olivier Fiquet, monsieur, and I am French, too."

Claude was delighted. "Surely, then, you are a Catholic—like myself?"

The young man shook his head and looked confused. "My parents were, but they are dead, monsieur. They came to London from Calais when I was small."

"And so you do not go to church? That is a pity."

"Oh, yes, monsieur, I go to church but not to the Roman Catholic."

"You mean—you are a Protestant?" exclaimed Claude. "I am sorry to hear that, my friend."

Again Fiquet shrugged. "If I were in France, monsieur, I would return to the faith of my fathers but this is London and so—"

Suddenly a horrible noise like the shrieks and wails of a thousand fiends in torment floated over the air. "What's that?" cried de la Colombiere, his face turning pale. "Where is it?"

"Don't try to find out more, monsieur," said Fiquet, detaining him. "That dreadful sound comes from the market place around the corner, where they are celebrating Guy Fawkes Day by burning huge figures of the Pope and the Papists. They are stuffed with live cats and set on fire. Come away, it is not a pretty sight."

The horrible stench of burning flesh was in their nostrils and they could see tongues of flame and smoke leaping up. The little girl whimpered and hugged her kitten closer. Fiquet put her down. "Run along home. There is nothing to be afraid of now."

"My God, what brutality," murmured Claude through clenched teeth as though the words were wrung from him against his will.

"These British are a brutal people," said Fiquet calmly. "One becomes used to it. Perhaps monsieur would like something to drink? I live only a few blocks from here—"

Claude thanked him and declined the drink but accepted the invitation to visit his lodging. It was wretchedly poor and, with the generosity of his nature, the priest pressed a sum of money into his hand. "Take this and buy yourself a warm coat. We French must stick together. Farewell, my compatriot. You shall hear from me again."

Charles the Second

XVII

At last the great moment had arrived. Now that the summons had come, Claude could hardly believe it. Tomorrow he would meet the King of England, tomorrow he would battle for that royal soul. So much depended upon him. Was he ready? Even after weeks of reflection, he wondered if he had marshaled his arguments in their best and strongest array.

"God go with you," said Father Bedingfield earnestly as he left Claude after imparting the momentous news. "The interview is at ten sharp but you may have to wait. Chif-finch will see to everything."

Claude opened a little notebook in which he had written arguments which he deemed suitable to influence the King.

After a brief perusal he placed it aside. He knew it almost by heart. He crossed the room and knelt down before the crucifix. The Christ of Calvary with the wound in His Sacred Heart was the best of all arguments. The intellect might be convinced but it was necessary to capture the King's will, arouse his conscience. Fear of eternal retribution, contrition for misdeeds were elementary in this spiritual combat.

Long before the appointed hour Father de la Colombiere walked slowly through St. James Park. The beautiful tract with its shining lake mirroring the sunlight, its deer and wildfowl held no interest for the priest this morning. He knew several of the lords and ladies strolling about but his greetings were absent-minded and perfunctory. At the far end was Whitehall—and the King. He heard the merry cries of a group of children playing on the green. Happy little creatures with no dread responsibility to curb their spirits. How he envied their innocent play! Centuries ago the Master had blessed little ones like these and said: "Of such are the Kingdom of Heaven." Perhaps—yes, now he was sure, the easiest way was to be quite guileless and simple. God might put the words of conversion in his mind. He straightened his shoulders and walked directly towards the royal palace.

Father Bedingfield, who had made the arrangements for the interview, had instructed Claude to go to the King's private door, where he would be expected at the appointed hour. "You are early, sir," said William Chiffinch, opening the door and conducting him up a narrow, winding stairs that led to another door. "This way, sir," said Chiffinch with the impassive expression and professional manner of the discreet servitor. Not the slightest surprise or curiosity did he display, for Chiffinch had smuggled up that same secret stairway some of the noblest as well as many of the most disreputable characters in all England. He ushered

Claude into an interesting room, the walls hung with many pictures. There were watercolors of ships at sea, a beautiful horse in oils and various hunting dogs. The large chairs were more comfortable than the furnishings of the formal chambers of the palace. A massive mahogany table held a partially carved model of a warship, a map, sextant and compass. The place had a charming individuality of its own. "Please be seated, sir," murmured Chiffinch, "and take your ease until His Majesty arrives. You will not be disturbed."

After he left Claude took out his breviary and began reciting the divine office. His lips were moving in prayer and he had just reached the end of the little hours, when he felt a soft touch on his shoulder. Startled, he looked up into dark, luminous eyes lit with a smile. The King!

"Pray keep your seat, good Father," said Charles as he dropped into a nearby chair. "I am deeply honored by the famous French Jesuit who has come to our shores." This courteous greeting was uttered in a pleasing voice in Claude's own tongue, which the King spoke like a native.

Instantly the priest felt a strong liking for this man. There was no comparison between him and his royal cousin, Louis XIV. He had a remarkable face framed in a long curling dark wig. The nose was large but aristocratic, the lips thick and curving, the skin almost swarthy. Despite the debonair gentility of his manner, Claude was aware that beneath the surface lay amazing courage and determination. Here was the older version of Bonnie Prince Charlie who had fought so valiantly at Worcester.

Claude was not long in coming to the point, frankness was the better course. "I am here to save Your Majesty's soul," he stated.

"That is very kind," returned Charles with a quizzical smile and quirk of the eyebrow. "But why only one lonely Jesuit for such an undertaking? Believe me, dear Father, I feel greatly complimented."

But de la Colombiere was not to be put off by jocose words. "So much depends on your conversion, Sire. Not only is your soul at stake, its eternal happiness or woe, but the whole destiny of England."

"My poor soul," sighed the King, "would that I had only myself to consider! I suppose one might consider me an intellectual Catholic and, of course, the Established Church of England has much of the old Faith left—"

The priest raised a hand in protest and his face became stern. "Sire, there can be no compromise with God. If you are convinced that the Catholic Church is the true one, then you must realize that the English Church is an heretical sect."

"Ah, but there are many things which I am quite sure you do not realize," replied Charles with a rueful look. "Otherwise you would not press me so severely. I am the King of England and my every act becomes public. Should I declare myself a Catholic, the consequences would be disastrous."

"It would not be necessary, Sire, to announce your conversion publicly," said Father de la Colombiere. "That could come later. After you give yourself to God, you will be stronger, grace will fill your soul. You will feel and act differently. Everything will be changed."

"I would lose my crown," stated the King positively. "The odious regime of Cromwell might be restored."

"But your people love you," interposed Claude, "and they have learned from bitter experience how unbearable life was under the Puritan yoke. They will never repudiate you, Sire."

Charles looked into the earnest but sympathetic face of the young priest and his gaze was dubious, almost melancholy. "England wants no Catholic on her throne, Father. As it is, I can soften the harsh laws against Catholics. In a few days Parliament will be in session and the anti-Papists

are preparing to put through another Test Act more drastic than the first. I shall use my influence to defeat it. Besides, I need money for ships," added the King, suddenly turning to a new argument. "Ours is an insular kingdom, we need the finest navy in the world to protect the realm. If even a whisper got around that I might be planning to embrace Catholicism, not a halfpenny would be forthcoming. I would leave England open to attack. My brother, a fine commander and one of the greatest naval leaders, was removed from the Admiralty because of his allegiance to Rome and his name howled through London's streets as the Papist Duke."

"The Duke of York has the courage of his convictions, Sire," said Father de la Colombiere relentlessly. "He does not set worldly affairs before God."

The King arose wearily and extended his hand in farewell. "I am deeply grateful to you, Father de la Colombiere. When the shipbuilding is over, come to see me again."

As he grasped the monarch's hand, Claude saw Chiffinch approaching. The interview was over. He had failed but he had the consolation of trying and of knowing, too, that the King really wanted to see him again. He went away with a feeling of sorrow in his heart for Charles. He tried to imagine some change in affairs which might cause him to take the step but reason rejected this as fantastic. Still life is unpredictable. Though the King was a powerful man his dissipated way of living might sicken him and turn his thoughts to eternity. The mysterious patterns of grace were always a source of hope.

Claude was thinking about Charles one morning when he received a summons from the Duke. He liked the blunt and valiant James with his downright ways. Charles had much of continental intrigue in his manner, great charm and poise. The younger brother was quite the opposite; his honest face handsomer than the King's, could set in stub-

born lines under his towering blond wig. He was as uncompromising in worldly matters as he was concerning his faith, which was as simple and unquestioning as a child's. Claude found him perturbed and worried.

"My wife is very ill, Father," he began. "I fear for her life."

Claude was amazed and incredulous. "But the Duchess was only slightly indisposed when I saw her a few days ago, Your Grace. Surely you are unduly alarmed."

"She has grown rapidly worse and Dr. Twombly has advised me that she has contracted a deadly ague, brought into England from the North American colonies. It is most insidious, for the sufferer feels better one day and worse the next."

"We Jesuits have a medicine made from the bark of the cinchona tree that grows in Peru," said Claude. "It is most beneficial in such fevers and saved the life of King Louis of France when he was a youth."

"I have heard of Jesuit bark," said the Duke, "but Dr. Twombly has no faith in it. Besides, it might be dangerous, he says, in her condition. He tells me that she is pregnant again. Poor little Mary Beatrice, I feel like a wretch when I see the torment of her racked body. She did not want to marry me, nor any man. Her whole heart was centered on the convent."

Father de la Colombiere spoke words of reassurance and comfort on the way to the sickroom. He found the Duchess in a high fever and desperately weak but quite clear-headed. "Father, won't you ask the Sacred Heart to make me well again?" she whispered.

"I shall, indeed, dear child," promised the priest, "and I shall say Mass for you tomorrow morning and every morning in my little oratory. I have dedicated it in honor of the Divine Heart of Our Saviour."

"I remember," murmured Mary Beatrice. "I have made

my confession to Father Galli"—he was her Italian confessor—"and received the Sacrament. I am not afraid to die. If it be God's will, I want to live." Her eyes fluttered shut and for a moment she was still. Then rallying her failing strength she said with quiet determination. "I want to bear a son, a Catholic heir to England's throne."

"God grant that it be so," said Father de la Colombiere, deeply touched by such fortitude and purpose in one so young. He made the sign of the cross over her and his lips moved in prayer. An expression of gratitude and tranquillity settled upon her beautiful face. He quietly slipped from the room.

"Your prayers will cure her, Father," said the Duke in a burst of confidence. "She seemed to improve the moment you entered."

"Prayer is our salvation, Your Grace," said the priest gently, "but when one is suffering from a malady for which there is a remedy, one should make use of it. Otherwise it would surely be unreasonable to expect God to perform a miracle of healing, would it not?"

"Of course, Father," agreed the Duke. "I understand your meaning and I shall see to it that the Jesuit bark is administered, regardless of the doctor's prejudice against it."

Claude left him in a hopeful frame of mind and during the days that followed his hopes increased, for his wife began to improve steadily. It was not long before the dreadful rigors subsided and her fever diminished. When the first day of spring came, she was able to leave her sick room and make a visit to the chapel, there to offer her petitions for the child she was expecting in November.

All Catholic England united to storm heaven that this third child of the Duke and Duchess might be a boy. Thereon rested the future of the Faith in this unhappy land of persecution and intolerance. The King had sired many

illegitimate sons but had no male child by his consort, Catherine of Braganza. James and his offspring would inherit the right of succession.

While Catholic England prayed for an heir, the Protestant majority, under the leadership of the unscrupulous Earl of Danby, lord treasurer, planned an offset by a marriage between Princess Mary and her Protestant cousin, William of Orange. James was opposed to this match for his elder daughter but Charles approved it for political reasons. Another blow aimed at Catholic hopes was the anti-Papist bill introduced into the House of Lords by Danby who controlled Parliament by an organized system of financial corruption that was unprecedented in the history of England. Under its terms no Catholic could ever occupy the throne, a direct move to exclude the Duke of York. To the surprise of many and the rejoicing of the Catholic minority the bill was defeated. Father de la Colombiere heard the good news from Edward Coleman, who dropped into the priest's room. Claude was writing at his desk and welcomed the excited secretary with a smile.

"Sit down, Mr. Coleman," invited Claude. "You are just in time for a dish of your English tea."

"Excellent, Father," said Coleman, whose deep-set eyes were shining with victory under his black, curling wig. A look of intense triumph transfigured his lean, withered face. "Everything was just as I predicted, Father. The Duke's enemies were routed completely. James will succeed to the throne in spite of them. The King knows that and is merely amusing himself at the expense of the schemers. He is far too clever for any of them, I assure you."

He rattled on with the latest political gossip. "The Commons want war with France but they won't pay for it. And now that the King has his 600,000 pounds for the Navy, he is driving a bargain with Louis to dissolve Parliament. Charles can count on him to buy England's neutral-

ity." Coleman placed his cup on the serving tray and looked curiously at the dark young man who removed it, "A new servant, father?"

"Yes, a Frenchman named Olivier Fiquet. He needed work so I found something for him to do here. He is very intelligent and useful in a clerical way." Claude might have added that he had reclaimed Fiquet to the Faith and that he paid for his services from his personal income. All of his salary from the Duchess was given away in charity, just as all his energies were devoted to missionary endeavors. He had no interest in the maze of intrigue and bribery surrounding the court.

Fiquet was not the only apostate restored to the fold by Father de la Colombiere during the months that followed. There were several more, both English and French, by the time that June came and with it the feast of Corpus Christi.

Corpus Christi, Body of Christ! Claude was enamored of that particular church festival, so splendidly ornamented with the vast and dazzling imagery of St. Thomas of Aquin. In a deep and personal way, too, he himself was involved, for it was on this day that Sister Margaret Mary had envisioned his own heart and hers forever united in the Sacred Heart. After that wonderful manifestation he had officially approved her revelation and then, on the Sunday within the Octave of Corpus Christi, had come the third great revelation in which Our Lord asked for a special day of reparation in honor of His Divine Heart. Never, no matter what might happen, would the scene be forgotten when he had knelt with that chosen soul and they had consecrated themselves in this life and in eternity to the Heart "which had loved men so much."

Gradually Claude had been unfolding in his sermons the doctrine of the Sacred Heart. Now on Corpus Christi he would speak to his hearers fully and with all the eloquence the Divine Master might put in his soul. Hitherto all his

talks were like the dawn creeping over the earth, veiled and misty, but now the sun would arise and they would see clearly. St. Thomas had made popular Corpus Christi and now, unworthy though he felt himself to be, God had selected him as the confidant of Margaret Mary, the apostle of His Sacred Heart.

He wrote rapidly, sketching out the plan of the sermon. It was not necessary to pause and deliberate, for the theme was like a smoldering fire, always alive in his heart. His humility did not daunt him, for he was wise enough to know that God uses all manner of persons to attain his ends. Besides, he was only attempting to tell the story of another, like a man showing to an audience a beautiful painting and discoursing on its touching points. Margaret Mary had shown him the canvas. It was his part, a secondary one but immensely important, to exhibit that mysterious and beautiful representation.

The chapel was crowded, the day ethereally lovely—June in England. The elusive beauty of spring had ripened into an early maturity, inexpressibly lovely. The fragile blossoms, the delicate tracery of young vines and grass, had now grown into richer hues and substantial forms. All nature was vibrant. Could anyone have chosen a more apt month for the Sacred Heart?

As he spoke, he tried to capture for his audience, the rapt and glorious visions and thoughts centering in the Adorable Heart. How warm and burning with love, infinite love, was this Sacred Heart! He could feel his pulse rise with inward emotion and he let himself go forth. When he had finished he experienced a sense of elation. He had done something for the Sacred Heart, his efforts had not been in vain, for he was certain that some of the celestial fire had illuminated and built little fires in the hearts of at least some of the congregation. And Father de la Colombe was happy, very happy.

That night when his servant had gone and also Fiquet, who had been helping him in a minor capacity, Claude leaned back in his chair with a contented sigh. He was weary, always weary, endlessly pushing himself, twenty-four hours were not long enough for a day. But this night he had a sense of accomplishment. It had been a very special day, this Corpus Christi.

A knock aroused him. It must be Coleman, hurrying in to tell him breathlessly of the latest political intrigue. Claude liked the impulsive man but tonight he wished to be alone. "Come in," he called.

To his surprise, it was Father Bedingfield. When his superior sat down, Claude saw that he was disturbed. Without delay, he came straight to the matter which had prompted his visit. "Father de la Colombiere, I am troubled over that sermon you preached this morning. I was not present but I believe I have a correct idea of the general trend and some of the particulars of your discourse."

Claude was astonished at this attitude on the part of the pious Jesuit but made no comment. "I do not care to mention his name but a certain English priest was present, who understands French perfectly. He is a convert to the Faith and he was shocked, scandalized by your views and teachings concerning the Heart of Our Divine Lord. In fact, Father, he made the statement in the presence of a large group that he considers you a heretic and a very insidious one, at that. I am afraid that he is going to stir up trouble for you."

"That is a baseless and unjust accusation," returned Claude. "The Sacred Heart of Jesus, wounded for mankind, is the most sublime emblem of His love and suffering. Devotion to It can be in no danger of falling into error."

"But this cult which you are spreading," said Bedingfield with a dubious air. "Is it not an innovation, Father?"

"It is not an innovation," answered Claude quickly. "It

is as old as John reclining on the breast of Jesus and hearing the beating of His Adorable Heart. Down through the ages it has been a familiar devotion with many holy individuals."

"Very true," agreed the superior. "I do not question the dogmatic soundness of devotion to the Sacred Heart. I admire your zeal and I am sure that many people might benefit by such a devotion. Also, I am thoroughly in accord with your views on more frequent communion. But that is not the point, dear Father," and here Bedingfield's look of distress increased. "I am only concerned at this time with the interests of the Church here in England. We must not present a disunited front. After all, the Jesuits are not the only group. In this mixture of religion and politics, our ranks must stand firm. That is why, I believe it would be advisable that you desist in future from any public utterances on the subject of the Sacred Heart."

Claude's face paled and he half rose from his chair. "You are forbidding me—"

The superior waved him to his seat. "Forbid is hardly the word, Father," he said with a smile. "I am merely suggesting that for the good of the cause, I deem it better that you expunge from your sermons any direct reference to the Heart of Jesus."

"That I cannot do without being recreant in my duty," answered Claude firmly. "It is my honest conviction that, far beyond the plan to convert the King of England to the Faith, is the desire of Our Lord that I spread devotion to His Divine Heart."

Father Bedingfield sighed. "Then I fear you are going to encounter a great deal of criticism and opposition."

There was a profoundly earnest, almost pleading look in Claude's dark eyes. For a moment he was prompted to reveal to his worried superior the revelation made by the Saviour Himself to Sister Alacoque and his own divinely

appointed part in the apostolate of the Sacred Heart. But judgment cautioned him against saying anything that might tax the credulity of this kindly but disapproving Englishman. He contented himself with saying: "Kings and rulers propose but God is my Master. I know He sent me to England for His own good purpose. I can resign, if you think proper. But never will I stop preaching love and reparation to the Sacred Heart."

"I see no one can alter your decision," said Father Bedingfield, rising to go. "Your stand fills me with admiration but—" he shook his white head. "The brave have much to suffer," he added cryptically. "Please stay on in England."

Gathering Shadows

XVIII

Despite the growing opposition among the English clergy, Father de la Colombiere continued to inculcate a grateful love for Jesus Christ through devotion and reparation to His Sacred Heart. It was encouraging to see the results of his zeal among the laity but he was often distressed and baffled by the hostility of his brother priests. Especially were those who held Jansenist views scandalized by the practice of First Friday Communion, which they regarded as a shocking and dangerous novelty. They argued in all sincerity that such familiarity with sacred things on the part of lay people in general must lead to laxity and sacrilege. Claude's position in Protestant England, a Jesuit and Frenchman, increased the antagonism, which was threaten-

ing to cause scandal and disruption. Persecution drew Catholics together in bonds of resolute unity, internal strife in times like these weakened and destroyed them.

Claude was in a state of discouragement one morning some months after Father Bedingfield's well-meant advice. He was almost on the verge of going to his superior and telling him that, rather than offend against charity by causing open strife, he would resign his post and leave England. While seated at his desk in this unhappy frame of mind, Fiquet deposited a letter before him. Claude's sensitive face brightened when he recognized Mother de Sau-maise's writing, for a word from Paray-le-Monial was doubly welcome at this critical moment.

As he opened the envelope there suddenly flashed through his mind the strange warning he had received from Sister Margaret Mary just before leaving Paray. She had told him then—and it had often puzzled him since—that “even persons consecrated to God would injure him and disapprove of what he said in his sermons to lead them to God.” These prophetic words were clear to him, at last. Quickly he scanned Mother de Saumaise's letter, finding at the end a note from Sister Margaret Mary. He read it carefully, knowing that all her communications to him were directed and guided by Our Lord. “O my Father,” wrote the chosen disciple, “My Divine Saviour has shown me that those who labor for the salvation of souls will have the art of touching the most hardened hearts and will labor with wonderful success, if they are themselves penetrated with a tender devotion to His divine Heart. Would that I could make known to the whole world all that I know of this amiable devotion! I conjure you to omit nothing to establish it everywhere.”

So this was the answer to his doubts and fears. Now he could face the future with renewed courage. He would have a battle on his hands but he would win over any ec-

clesiastical group that might try to stop him. Claude knew that God was on his side and that was sufficient. What he did not know at the moment was that a monstrous and terrible future awaited him and all Catholics in England. Mercifully, God does not disclose the Calvary that lies ahead, lest poor humans perish from horror and sadness.

Summer became autumn, the green park of St. James faded into brownish tints, the trees were a golden red blaze of leaves. The warm air was displaced by chill breezes. On a day early in November the Duke of York's daughter Mary became the bride of William of Orange, much to the joy of the greater part of England's population and My Lord Danby. The marriage did not allay the fanatical hatred towards Catholicism but only gave the Protestants a feeling of triumph.

Meanwhile Claude had another interview with Charles, a somewhat ambiguous visit. That monarch had not discontinued his lax, immoral life, nor did his conversation reveal any significant change. On the surface, his insistence on marrying his niece to William would seem an indication of Protestant leanings. However, Claude was a shrewd judge of human nature and realized that the King was an adroit and unscrupulous politician, whose actions were not necessarily an open sesame to his mind. But Claude carried away with him a semblance of hope for the King's conversion, since Charles had asked him to answer the arguments of the Established Church that she was the true, ancient faith of England. He had surprised the priest by writing down his answers, pausing from time to time to ask a pertinent question. Claude had given him a complete and logical rebuttal which the King received with evident gratitude. He had folded his notes and placed them carefully away.

And now the trees lost their leaves, the chill winds had become bitter, fog and ice covered the park. November was not yet over but the early English winter had arrived.

Mary Beatrice, Duchess of York, bore a son and Catholic hopes quickened. A few weeks later, the baby boy died and with him perished the possibility of a Catholic line of succession.

Claude's life as preacher to the Duchess of York was a perpetual nervous strain, for the Duke was a target of hatred and bigotry and Claude shared in the general atmosphere of ugly rumour and vicious intrigue. All England was in a ferment of excitement; the groundwork was being laid for the most evil calumny in all English history. But now was added a new and severe trial for the saintly Jesuit, who worked incessantly to lead souls to God. With the coming of the snows, the dark, melancholy days and the cold gales, Claude developed a cough. Spiritually he was always at war and now his overtaxed body was racked with exhaustion. The Duchess' doctor could not allay the malady. Another man would have fled this inclement place but Claude stayed on, like a brave soldier who does not flinch in the face of withering gunfire.

Claude spent a miserable winter, his cough increasing in violence. It was hard to work but he drove himself feverishly to the endless tasks that confronted him. He was hopeful of losing the racking cough when the weather moderated but meanwhile he suffered wretchedly. The snow and cold were bad enough, worse still was the choking smoke of sea coal which filled the air and mixed with the ever-present fog, enveloped London in dense shadows.

Spring came, primrose and daffodil poked up their winsome heads, yellow dandelions sprinkled the emerald lawns of the park like golden coins tossed by the opulent hand of nature. The sun warmed the atmosphere but Claude's cough persisted. The sensible thing would be to leave England, but the fervent Jesuit remained. Soon the provincial synod would meet, when new officers of the Society would be elected and he was eager to meet them.

In all there were forty Jesuits on the English mission of whom about half were living in and around London. These men led strange, adventurous and perilous lives. Some lodged in the French and Spanish Embassies, others in the homes of pious Catholics, all were dressed as laymen and conducted services in secret. Claude had gradually come to know all those who lived in the City area, was proud and happy to share the friendship of these brothers in religion, though constantly on guard against suspicion. Bedingfield was his closest associate and often Claude's moments of depression were dispelled by that staunch, intrepid man. Surely with such leaders, there was hope for Catholic England but day by day the news was bad. Danby was still plotting to exclude the Duke of York from the throne and stamp out every vestige of Catholicism. And with the release of the Earl of Shaftesbury from the Tower, a more formidable and venomous foe was aligned against the Church. Like a monster of the jungle for whom no method of warfare was too vile, he lay in wait for the moment to strike.

"Shaftesbury is scheming to reinstate himself by a fresh attack on the Church and its defender, the Duke," said Bedingfield, who kept abreast of political activities. "He will scruple at nothing to gain his ends and with his undeniable genius for statecraft, he is a growing menace. I lose all patience with the King for the venal crew he surrounds himself with. I fear greatly for his immortal soul."

Claude sighed regretfully. "He cannot or will not take a firm stand for what he knows to be right."

"I would rather die like a priest and an Englishman than be recreant to my faith," stated Bedingfield in his forthright manner. And looking into the fiery depths of his fearless blue eyes Claude read serenity of purpose. Nothing could daunt Bedingfield.

Sometimes Claude would meet other Jesuits at his supe-

rior's quarters in the French Embassy. He found them all different but essentially the same true soldiers of St. Ignatius. There was William Ireland, who had given up his rights to Crofton Hall in Yorkshire, the home of many people who still clung to the Faith of their fathers. Ireland was a man of exceptional ability, in the early forties and with a powerful physique which stood him in good stead when he traveled around the countryside, disguised as an itinerant blacksmith. He was known as the Ironmonger, yet his manners were perfect and his kind, lean face molded in aristocratic lines.

Then there was the boyish John Gavan, soon to be professed. Like the others, he had an alias, Mr. Green. Many of them had several names, all were living in danger. Claude learned about the Jesuits who worked away from London in distant fields. Some of these had desperate adventures, hidden in chimneys and secret caches which traced back to Elizabethan days. There was that great Welshman, Father Lewis, or Mr. Baker as he was called, who made incredible journeys over wild mountains and lonely moors. He traveled when the sun had set under cover of night. In cabins and in great houses he was known as the Father of the Poor. Though over sixty he did not cease his religious and charitable errands. And there was Thomas Jennison, who had renounced a title and rich inheritance to enter the Society, leaving his worldly possessions to his younger brother. All the Jesuits had interesting careers; they smiled in the face of death, torture and imprisonment. It took sublime faith, limitless courage and great depths of charity to carry on as they did.

"What am I to these brave men," Claude thought. When he knelt before the altar in his little oratory, he never forgot to pray for them, for it was on such men depended the Faith of England. He felt in his humility that he was doing very little to advance the love of God in the hearts of

Englishmen. But it was God's will and he was always consoled by the knowledge that God had chosen him to preach the burning doctrine of the Sacred Heart. Oh, if only he could kindle some little fire of that divine conflagration! If only these little fires would spread and spread and cover England! Gladly would he give his life as a sacrifice to accomplish so great a goal. Yet his wretched cough tied him down. Impossible not to recognize the fact that he was growing weaker. Spring had not cured him. Perhaps summer might but he was doubtful.

A painful incident was the dismissal of Fiquet. Claude had discovered him rummaging among his letters on more than one occasion. The man was ungrateful and Claude had seen enough to seriously doubt the honesty of his conversion.

"I'm glad you got rid of him," said Father Bedingfield. "I never liked his shifty eyes."

"I met him under circumstances that gave me a very favorable impression," said Claude regretfully, thinking of how Fiquet had come to his rescue.

"It is quite likely the young knave planned things that way," returned his superior. "I know how generous and kind-hearted you are, so be on guard. The country is teeming with odious spies in the employ of our enemies who would like to see us hanging from the gallows tree. Nothing is too low to suit their evil purposes and nothing too sacred for them to smirch. I hope you've seen the last of Fiquet. There's a fellow by the name of Oates, who has been trying to enter the Society and still is. He used to be a Baptist, then an Anglican minister. We dismissed him once from the Spanish college but he was so persuasive, we gave him another trial at St. Omer's. I'm afraid it was a grave mistake."

Titus Oates was but a name to Claude but the day would come when he would know more of that sinister figure,

who would go down in English history as the symbol of murderous treachery.

The synod was held in May in the apartments of the Duke of York, who gave this important meeting his protection and approval. Necessarily it must be conducted secretly, for London was a hotbed of intolerance. The business of the session was disposed of and the elections held. Father Thomas Whitbread became provincial and Claude's new superior. He was sixty-one and had labored for more than thirty years in the eastern counties of England. His acquaintance amongst the old aristocratic families, who were still Catholic, was extensive. The procurator, Father William Barrow, was re-elected. He, too, had grown old on the missions, working for the past thirty-five years in the London District. He came from Lancashire and was widely known, sometimes as Waring and again as Harcourt. He was seventy now but still able to handle his position with energy and wisdom.

The company of such men gave Claude a feeling of joy; their plans for the future, their discussion of conditions held his attention. How pitifully small this little band, hidden away, while all around was a world of lies, intrigue and wickedness. Could this tiny leaven keep alive the dying faith of England?

A very old priest sat quietly in a corner. He was Father Francis Nevill, in his eighties, whose mild, blurred eyes had seen much of English history enacted before them. Yet they could twinkle at a joke. He did not speak much, though deferred to by the others. One thing he did say which made an impression on Claude. It was after a rather heated remark by the out-spoken Bedingfield. "Remember, Father Bedingfield, England has not altogether lost the Faith. It was stolen from her."

There was much truth in the observation. Outwardly the Established Church had kept many of the forms and

much of the ritual of the Catholic Church. People had been deceived by a clever admixture of political skullduggery and a sham appearance of religion. No man likes to be called a traitor to his country and Catholics were placed in that position. Besides, the chicanery of kings was enough to cause many to fall away. There were plenty of Englishmen who held that the Catholics were plotting to overthrow the government and betray their country into the hands of the French king.

The end of the synod arrived, the various details were completed, the work to be accomplished set forth, the course of action to be taken, should certain emergencies arise. All through the meeting Claude was mindful of the extreme danger in which the Jesuits lived, yet despite the constant menace these men could laugh. Though of every age and thoroughly unlike in character, there was some haunting quality in each face that was the same. It attracted and puzzled the French Jesuit—and then suddenly he understood. They had looked at death, had felt death grinning hideously at their elbow wherever they were, and were unafraid. With a great surge of joy, Claude realized that these were saintly men to a high degree, that all were martyrs in spirit, ready at any moment to give their life's blood for their religion.

The parting hour drew near, the conversation became desultory. Claude wondered when and where they would meet again. The shifting political scenes made the future uncertain. Very likely he might not see them assembled next year unless through some miraculous change his physical condition should improve. Another English winter might carry him off.

The new provincial's strong voice aroused him from his speculations. "This Titus Oates is a dangerous fellow," Whitbread was saying. "He has abused our charity."

Claude's interest was aroused. Others too, became attentive, the small groups gathered together.

"Oates has been given too many chances," went on the provincial. "It was a shock to me to learn that he is now at St. Omers and I intend to recommend his immediate dismissal. He is an unscrupulous rascal with no principle. Did you know that he was a jailbird and trumped up an abominable charge against a poor schoolmaster? He's as vile as they come and his evil countenance is but a reflection of his twisted soul."

"What does he look like?" asked Claude.

"He's a fat, squat creature. His face is repulsive, a mottled purple, and he has the longest chin of any man in England. It covers half his face," spoke up Father Bedingfield.

"I don't see how anyone could trust such an unprepossessing fellow," said Ireland.

Bedingfield reflected for a moment. "I must confess, it's difficult to understand. Intellectually he is below average but he has a somewhat uncanny power of influencing people. Before his pretended interest in Catholicism he was chaplain to the Duke of Norfolk. Rather amazing for an escaped convict, one must admit."

"Perhaps his appearance is so grotesque that one feels sorry for him," speculated Claude.

"Ah, Father de la Colombiere," remarked Father Mico, joining the group, "you have a point there. Oates is pitiful and I must admit that I, for one, was taken in by him. But his voice may be his charm. It's slow, peculiar, insinuating. And his eyes, though small and sunken, have a hypnotic quality."

"There is a power for evil in this horrible creature," said Father Whitbread. "I've been getting facts, not gossip, about him."

And so ended the synod. Claude had enjoyed it intensely,

felt a new buoyancy of hope and courage. If the discussion of Titus Oates had not come up, it would have been perfect. Somehow the shadow of Oates lurked over Claude's serenity of soul. Only a few weeks afterwards, the provincial left for the continent and on his return, Claude learned that Oates had been expelled from St. Omers. "I am convinced the scoundrel was never anything but a sham Catholic," said Whitbread.

The provincial was satisfied that justice had been done. Oates could only have tarnished the Society's name had he been permitted to continue at St. Omers. Now squelched in his hypocritical plans, the Jesuit Order need no longer concern itself with him. Father Whitbread was correct in stating that Oates was a sham Catholic but this evil genius was more than that. The provincial read only the exterior acts which had led to Oates' dismissal. Pity for the grotesque creature had been wasted. But if Father Whitbread could have seen beneath the surface of that ugly face and into that hideous soul, he would not have gone calmly about his duties. For the Jesuits were not finished with Titus Oates.

Burning with frustrated anger, Oates left St. Omers and returned to London. Another would have been crushed in spirit but this man was used to disgrace. He went directly to the home of Dr. Israel Tonge, rector of St. Michael's church, whose chief aim in life was a bitter, relentless persecution of Catholics. He was widely known as the author of many pamphlets, maligning the Church's activities in England since the Reformation. It was Tonge, in fact, who had hatched the scheme for his protege, Oates, to insinuate himself into the graces of the Jesuits for the purpose of spying upon them. Oates, who could trust no man, had agreed but at the same time his twisted mind had foreseen the possibility of rising to great heights in the Church.

Vengeance filled Oates' mind. He would still become

famous and successful. Those very Jesuits who had thwarted his ambitions would be the means of his glory and exultation. And Tonge would put the words into his head. Tonge was delighted to see his old friend back in London and lent a willing ear to his stories about the Jesuits. Did the doctor know that they had held a secret session only a short while ago right here in London? That they were scheming to overthrow the government, oust Charles and put the Duke of York on the throne? That the Duke's wife was an emissary of the Pope and her secretary, Coleman, the go-between for the heads of the Jesuit Order in France and Louis? Bit by bit the monstrous fabrication took shape as Tonge seized on each invention of Oates and twisted it into a more sinister and deadly pattern.

Then came the centering of Oates' imagination on his grand scheme. Tonge could write it down for him and Tonge could influence people in high places to carry it out.

Thus in a quiet rectory on Wood street on a summer's night of 1678 was conceived that horrible and bloody attack on Catholics known to history as the Popish Plot. It exceeded even the foul designs of Oates.

Popish Plot

XIX

For many weeks Father de la Colombiere had been awaiting an audience with Charles II. He was disappointed. From what Father Bedingfield told him, he concluded that the King was not desirous to meet him. Father Bedingfield advanced two reasons: Charles was in a good humor, things were going along smoothly with him and he did not want to be disturbed. Also, Father de la Colombiere had deeply impressed the King and that royal person did not intend to change his dissolute way of life. He preferred to put off the day of his conversion.

“You make his conscience uneasy,” said Bedingfield. “He is afraid you will make him give up his mistresses and look to his immortal soul.”

The summons came unexpectedly. It was a warm August night when Chiffinch suddenly appeared in the Jesuit's room. As they walked across St. James Park the air was sultry and heat lightning played in the heavens. His Majesty was waiting in the little room and apologized to de la Colombiere for his long-delayed audience. Claude immediately began talking to the King about his soul. The monarch's smile faded, he lightly tried to turn the conversation, but Claude must have his say, for his duty was clear. His eyes flashed and his voice was stern. Never in his life had the King been reprimanded in such logical and powerful language.

Charles squirmed in his chair. There was no answer to Father de la Colombiere's honest statements. Now was the opportunity for Charles to make peace with his God but he was too sunk in a round of sinful pleasures, too involved politically. He was no longer the gay, brave Bonnie Prince Charlie, who hid in the Royal Oak and owed his life to the Benedictine friar, Dom Huddleston. He was a middle-aged roué, grown flabby with luxury, and de la Colombiere knew that he was losing the battle for the King's soul. But perhaps at some later date, Charles might recall his warnings. Sickness, sudden dangers, misfortunes often were blessings in disguise, reflected the priest. The King was but mortal man and subject like others to these calamities which compel one to face reality.

When he had finished, Claude leaned back. He was extremely weary tonight and talking had been an effort, for he had used every energy of his keen intellect. Charles glanced through a window. The sheet lightning was increasing, there was a brooding menace in the stillness. When he turned to look at the Jesuit, Claude noticed the relief in his face and knew that he had decided to temporize once more. Further argumentation was useless. The King relaxed into his first mood of good humored flip-

pancy. "Perhaps you have come to slay my body as well as my soul," he remarked in jesting tones.

Claude did not understand this strange remark but knew the King's laughter belied the meaning of his words. "Know you not, good Father," he went on, "that a great plot has been hatched by the Jesuits to assassinate me? I should be in terror of you and call out the guard. It would be a simple matter to pull a knife from your doublet and deliver the fatal stab."

Claude did not relish this sort of joking and did not reply.

"Furthermore," continued Charles, "you Jesuits have dubbed me with the beautiful title of the Black Bastard or No. 48. A nice epithet to apply to my royal person!"

"I am afraid, Sire," remarked Claude, "that I fail to comprehend."

"And well you might," said the King, "for a more senseless, idiotic charge was never invented in the history of mankind. It's a fantastical conglomeration of absurdities brought to my attention in all seriousness only a short while ago by Kirkby of the royal laboratory. With trembling voice he begged me to listen to a deep dark plot, concocted by the Jesuits, to assassinate me. The amazing discovery was made by Dr. Tonge, the notorious bigot, and a certain Titus Oates—"

An exclamation broke from de la Colombiere's lips. "I have heard of Oates, Your Majesty. He is capable of any calumny."

"I have talked to both Oates and Tonge," explained the King. "Oates looks like a reptile and Tonge, of course, is a fanatic. They warned me that I am to be put to death in diverse ways—I am to be poisoned, stabbed and my wretched body is to be riddled with bullets, silver bullets. It seems the Jesuits have respect for the person of kings."

"What incredible lies," deplored Claude. "No sin so easy to commit as vicious slander, no sin so hard to repair."

"I am used to such fabrications," returned Charles with a careless shrug. "I referred them to Danby, my usual pretext for getting rid of such pests. And now farewell, dear Father. Tomorrow I leave with James and his wife for Windsor. Your friend, Father Bedingfield, will be along. Perhaps you might join us?"

"I thank Your Majesty but I have services on Assumption Day."

And thus ended the interview. Father de la Colombiere was not pleased but he had done all in his power. Some day God in His mercy might spare the King and give him time to repent of his sins and follies. If only the King were firm! Claude wondered how His Majesty would act, should a crisis arise. The thought was filled with great import, for the King was not only accountable for his own deeds, the English people of every class were profoundly effected.

It had been disquieting to learn about Titus Oates. Claude felt an ominous sense of foreboding, difficult to shake off. He tried to immerse his mind in the beautiful and entrancing thoughts connected with the Assumption. Suddenly, as he sat at his desk, his lungs were filled to the point of suffocation. He coughed desperately and when he took his kerchief from his mouth he saw that it was stained crimson. Darkness descended upon him, he fell over on the desk. When he became conscious again, he saw more blood dyeing the pages of his manuscript.

The horrible discovery dawned upon Claude. He had had a severe haemorrhage. Despite the tragedy of the moment, in his humility he accepted it with resignation. He had not converted the King of England, perhaps another could. He had tried to propagate the doctrine of the Sacred Heart and, in a measure, had succeeded. Only the continual assurance of Sister Margaret Mary that he was God's selection sustained him. But now, what could he accomplish? His trembling hands could scarcely pick up the pages of

his manuscript. Was his work over in England? Unable to do anything, he could only pray. His halting lips opened but he found it difficult to pray. Well, at least he could try to keep in the presence of God and do His holy will. With great effort, he crept over to his bed and lay down. For a long time he remained motionless, then slowly he felt strength returning. Calmly he considered the future. He must consult his superior, Father Whitbread. The way of obedience was the only way for a religious.

Claude was very ill for several days. The doctor gave him a potion of strong herbs and advised rest. Father Whitbread, inwardly alarmed by Claude's appearance, preserved a calm and cheering demeanor while suggesting that a return to France might be beneficial. There was really nothing to be done immediately, he assured Claude, except to build back his strength and, indeed, the English weather was excellent now.

On his part, Claude noticed that the superior looked far from well. He had aged since assuming his new office and his breath had grown short. "You look tired, Father," said Claude. "You are working too hard."

Father Whitbread smiled. "We live in strenuous times and I'm getting old. My heart can't stand the pace."

"Better rest, then, as you advise me to do," returned Claude.

The superior shook his head. "When one reaches sixty one must expect to wear out. I intend to keep going until I drop. With you it is different. You are still young and can build back to health, provided you take care of yourself."

While Father de la Colombiere was confined to his bed, incredible events were taking place. The Titus Oates story was growing like a fire. There was much talk about Jesuits, Papists and Frenchmen seeking to kill the King and place his brother, the Catholic Duke, on the throne. The rumor,

at first vague and indefinite, began to take tangible form. The Pope, it was whispered was planning to conquer England and Ireland. He had commissioned the Jesuits to form an army and with their confederates, they were preparing to overthrow the Government and exterminate all Protestants. At a secret meeting, the Jesuits had plotted the assassination of the King as the first move in their campaign. With the King murdered and the Duke on the throne, the Popish army intended to overrun England, massacre the Protestants and burn towns.

Day by day and hour by hour the crazy inventions gained momentum, for they were being deliberately spread by a vicious underground of hired rogues. Not only Oates but the Earl of Shaftesbury paid for the circulation of these malicious lies. He placed no credence in the calumnies of Oates and Tonge but seized upon them without scruple to further his own designs. If the public was foolish enough to believe such yarns, then let the Popish Plot furnish the means for his restoration to full political power. Shaftesbury had been waiting for just such an opportunity as this. So while Oates paraded before the public as the discoverer of Jesuitical treachery, Shaftesbury set in motion his diabolical machine.

At Windsor, Father Bedingfield received a number of letters, supposedly written by fellow Jesuits, but recognizable as clumsy forgeries. Evidently someone was attempting to incriminate him. He took the letters to the Duke, who scanned them indignantly. "This is Oates' work, Father, but I recognize Shaftesbury behind it. Let me show these to the King. Maybe this will prick the surface of his indifference."

James was greatly disturbed, knowing that behind all this subterfuge of a Popish plot was Shaftesbury's iron determination to exclude him from the throne and deal the Church in England a dastardly blow from which it would

never recover. Yet even when shown the forged letters, Charles refused to take the situation seriously. And when Danby appeared a few days later with more information against the Catholics which Oates had supplied, the monarch continued to make light of the whole matter. "It's too preposterous," said Charles. "No sane person could believe such nonsense. Pray dismiss it from your thoughts," he advised his brother. "A month from now 'twill be forgotten."

When the royal party returned to London in mid-September, Father Bedingfield was distressed to learn that Father Whitbread had suffered an acute heart attack and had been anointed. He hurried to Wild House, where the Jesuits had lodgings above the Spanish Embassy. John Grove met him at the door. Grove was a pious layman who lived with the Jesuits. Their quarters were leased in his name as a measure of safety.

"I just heard the sad news about Father Whitbread, John," said Bedingfield. "Is there any hope?"

"He has rallied a little since Father Fenwick gave him the last rites," said Grove.

A few moments later Father Bedingfield sat at the bedside of the provincial and gazed down into his stricken face with a feeling of intense grief. The two were lifelong friends. They had been classmates at St. Omers, had entered the Jesuit novitiate together and for many years had labored in the same field. Shocking and painful now, to suddenly realize that Thomas Whitbread was a dying man, a man grown old and broken before his time. Yet under the white hair and furrowed brow, the blue eyes were still bright with intelligence and fire. The two clasped hands and Whitbread said in a feeble voice. "I'm glad you are here, Father."

For a few moments they talked and when Bedingfield rose to go the provincial asked his old friend to look after

Father de la Colombiere for him. "I am worried over his health. I intended to see him safely back to France but now—" He made a helpless gesture and Father Bedingfield quickly interrupted: "Do not disturb yourself, Father. I shall attend to the poor young man for you without any more delay. Another English winter would be fatal in his case, I fear."

A look of gratitude and relief filled the provincial's eyes and spoke as eloquently as the words he was too weak to utter. Father Bedingfield waited until the lids slowly closed and the patient fell into a restful sleep. Then tiptoeing softly from the room, he joined the other Jesuits who lodged at Wild House. They were William Ireland, John Fenwick and Thomas Jennison. While in the presence of the sick man, he had carefully avoided anything that might be the least disturbing. But now there was the matter of those forged letters to discuss. Especially since one of them was supposedly written by Father Ireland, the others by the provincial himself.

"What an obvious blunder," said the Ironmonger, heaving his huge shoulders impatiently. "I left London two weeks before you did and only returned last night. It would be impossible for me to have written such a letter."

"And poor Father Whitbread was in a coma on one of those dates," commented Fenwick. "When I anointed him, I thought he would not last the night. It was a miracle the way he recovered."

"Thank God for that," said Bedingfield. "We mustn't worry him now but later I intend to warn him, so that he too can be on his guard."

"Was there anything damaging in the letters?" asked Fenwick.

Bedingfield frowned. "They seemed meaningless enough. However, all mentioned a meeting that is supposed to have taken place in Father Whitbread's rooms on the night of

August 19th. That might have reference to the bogus Jesuit plot against the King."

"Undoubtedly," nodded Jennison. "And of course, the senders expected to intercept the letters before they fell into your hands. Someone must have bungled."

"The whole thing is so crude and stupid that one can hardly criticize the King for refusing to take it seriously," said Bedingfield. "I must show you those letters. They are mis-spelled, the writing an illiterate scrawl—"

"Oh, you have the letters," Ireland interrupted to ask. "I took it for granted you had destroyed them."

"That was my first impulse," answered Bedingfield, "but the Duke advised me to hold on to them until Oates is exposed and the country wakes up from this weird nightmare."

As he left Wild House and turned towards St. James Palace, the Jesuit's thoughts were tinged with irony. It was hard to comprehend why his countrymen were so bitterly opposed to the Catholic faith and the Society of Jesus, so determined to believe the worst. They would rather listen to malicious lies than the truth. And Bedingfield thought of Father de la Colombiere and the burning charity for all men that filled his heart and drove him without rest in a thousand acts of mercy. He had spent himself, undermining his health in this harsh climate, even as he had given all his worldly gains to feed and clothe the needy, regardless of their religious beliefs. Yet these same ungrateful people were ready to believe that every Jesuit was a fiendish murderer.

Before going to Father de la Colombiere's apartments, Father Bedingfield conferred with the Duchess, who saw the necessity for his return to France even though she deeply regretted losing her spiritual director. "Dr. Twombly has advised the change," she told Father Bedingfield, "as soon as our patient is well enough to make the trip.

Much as we grieve to give him up, it is better for him. Even if he were well and strong, England in these evil days is not a safe place for any Frenchman, much less one who is also a Jesuit."

Bedingfield's heart was moved when he looked at Claude. His friend was propped up in bed but his face was ghastly, his hands so thin the bones showed prominently. He was still very weak but his fine eyes were alive, glowing with emotion.

"I'm better, much better, Father," he exclaimed. "Oh, if only I could get up! It gives me such a queer, helpless feeling to be out of things, while so much is happening."

Bedingfield pulled a chair over and sat down beside the bed. His big, powerful hands seized Claude's in a warm, vital grasp. "You must leave soon, very soon, dear Father de la Colombiere," he said with sudden emphasis.

"But I cannot—"

Bedingfield interrupted. "I alone know of your real mission here in England. You have done your best, far beyond my expectations, with the King. Although he has not heeded your admonitions, you have touched his heart. Perhaps some day, who knows, he may become a Catholic."

"But—"

"No, don't talk. You must save every ounce of strength so that you can undertake the journey home. Believe me, the doctor and the Duchess both urge it. This climate is death for you and in these perilous times anything may happen. Your work in England is finished."

Claude realized the truth in the words of this sincere friend and great character. He bowed his head in acquiescence.

It was a great relief to Father Whitbread to learn that Claude would soon be safely on his way to France. "God grant that it is not too late," he said.

"The doctor says he has a good chance, provided he stays

"Behold This Heart"

in a favorable climate and does not exert himself beyond his strength," Bedingfield assured him.

During the week that followed the provincial's condition remained unchanged, although his old friend fancied he saw a slight improvement each day. At least, he was holding his own and for that Bedingfield was profoundly grateful. The fall ember days came with heavy rains and raging winds. Fortunate that Father de la Colombiere was not leaving until the first day of October for the weather should be clear again by that time and the seas smooth. The Duchess was planning to depart for Holland for a visit with her stepdaughter Mary. The King and the Duke of York would leave at the same time for the coursing season at Newmarket.

Father Bedingfield was on his way to Father de la Colombiere's rooms one morning when he met the Duchess' secretary in the hall. A glance was enough to show that Coleman was in a distracted state of mind. "I must talk to you at once, Father," he gasped. "Something terrible has happened."

With a sense of premonition the Jesuit followed him to his study. Coleman gestured for him to be seated, then sank into his chair. "I have just come from our friend, Sir Edmondbury Godfrey," he began. Bedingfield nodded. Godfrey, justice of the peace for Westminster, was an old associate and neighbor, whose staunch Protestant convictions had never interfered with their friendship.

"He told me," went on Coleman, "that last night Titus Oates and two other men appeared before him and swore out an affidavit to a conspiracy of the Popish Party against the King's life, the Government and the Protestant religion. There are eighty-one specific charges, all treasonable, and a long list of names. We are all involved, Father. You are named and so am I—"

"Outrageous," cried Bedingfield, angry color mounting

to his face. "There is not a single shred of evidence to substantiate the charges."

"That won't stop Oates," said Coleman. "Godfrey warned me that he recognized the two ruffians with him as paid informers with jail records. They will swear to anything."

Bedingfield jumped to his feet. "We must halt the scoundrel before it is too late."

"No use, Father," groaned Coleman. "The warrants for our arrest have been issued. We'll be tried and condemned to hang—"

Bedingfield grasped him by the shoulder. "Pull yourself together, man, and come with me to the Duke. He knows this scheme has been brewing for over a month and has urged the King to put a stop to it. Now he will insist on action."

Something of the Jesuit's resolute spirit electrified Coleman's despairing mood. A faint hope dawned in his haggard eyes as he followed Bedingfield from the room. Luckily, they found James in his apartments and Coleman repeated his story. As he listened, the grave look on the Duke's face deepened. He questioned Coleman for more details, finding out that many other Catholic laymen were accused as well as priests other than the Jesuits, although the latter were designated the leaders of the alleged plot.

"I am not surprised at anything you tell me," said James. "It was very decent of Godfrey to warn you."

"What would you advise me to do, Your Grace?" asked Coleman, clasping his hands nervously.

"I have often told you not to be so busy and meddlesome, Edward," replied the Duke in his forthright manner. "If you have any papers that might hurt you, go home at once and dispose of them."

After the secretary rushed off to obey, James looked at Father Bedingfield significantly. "A fool can do more harm

than a scoundrel," he said. "If Coleman would confine his indiscretions to the spoken word instead of putting them on paper, he would not involve himself and a great many innocent people."

Father Bedingfield agreed. "I know he has written letters to Pere LaChaise, confessor to the King of France, concerning the sad condition of the Church here in England, in which he has expressed a great many opinions that could be construed in a bad light if they fell into Oates' hands."

"For example?" questioned the Duke.

"He showed me a letter suggesting that Louis furnish him with money which he would use in the Catholic interest, for one thing," said Bedingfield, "and I recall a phrase in which he described Protestantism as a 'pestilent heresy to be utterly subdued in the three kingdoms,' also references to his plans to 'deal the Protestant religion the greatest blow it has received since its birth.'"

"Our enemies could use those letters," said the Duke, "but let us trust they remain in the possession of Pere LaChaise."

"Have you a plan, Your Grace?" asked Bedingfield.

"My brother must be persuaded to call the Privy Council together and compel Oates to appear for questioning."

That same afternoon Oates was summoned before the Privy Council. A few simple questions were enough to expose him and discredit his charges. Most damaging to Oates were five letters which he asserted were written by Father Bedingfield. These both the King and his brother recognized as part of the forged correspondence they had seen at Windsor. Oates was denounced by the council, even the anti-Catholic members admitted that the man was a mendacious scoundrel.

Father Bedingfield and Coleman received the welcome news from the Duke. Confident that the Popish Plot had been exploded, James and the King left for Newmarket

in the best of spirits. Coleman bustled happily away to tell his friend Godfrey of the unexpected and happy outcome.

But they reckoned without the fanaticism of the mob and the machinations of Shaftesbury. While Coleman was absent, his place was thoroughly ransacked and a mass of half-burned papers collected. Worse still, a strong box containing copies of his entire correspondence with Pere La-Chaise was found under the floor of his bedroom.

Oates was reestablished, the Duke denounced as a rascal and a traitor. Later that night an angry crowd collected at Wild House, while Oates and his followers raided the Jesuit lodgings. Father Whitbread was torn from his bed and thrust into a coach with Father Ireland, Father Fenwick and John Grove. There was no room for Father Jennison, so he was dragged through the streets behind the carriage wheels. They were taken to Newgate Prison.

Persecution

XX

As Claude surveyed the room where everything was packed for his departure, curious and depressing feelings welled up in his heart. So this was the end! What tragic and despairing circumstances pressed in upon his mind, which surged with contradictory emotions of excitement and apathy. The news of the arrests of his brothers in religion at Wild House was a fearful shock. It was followed by another staggering event. Less than twenty-four hours later, Edward Coleman and then Father Bedingsfield were taken into custody.

Claude walked to the window and looked down into the park. The trees were shedding their leaves, which fell on the browning grass. Those that still clung to the branches were like golden banners in the sunlight. They made him

think of an army, bravely displaying its pennants even though they fell at every gust of the wind. It was a gallant little force, proudly going down to defeat. Soon those trees would be denuded and only the limbs would remain, bare and lifeless before winter's icy blasts. We are like that, thought Claude, going down before the evil spirits of hate and treachery.

It grieved him deeply to leave England at such a time but he could accomplish nothing by staying and it was against all reason to hesitate. In fact, he might actually be hurting the cause. Obedience was the first and fundamental law of the religious life. Yet he could not leave without some effort to help his friends. The thought of them lying in foul jails was a heavy weight on his soul.

He sat down and held his head in his thin hands. He was still weak, even though he had convalesced and regained some measure of strength. What should I do, he asked his inner self. Surely I cannot go away and leave those fine men at the mercy of their implacable and wicked enemies. And always a mocking voice cried in his brain, you can do nothing, absolutely nothing.

Then came a flash of hope. I'll see Father Barrow. He is wise and has great stability of character, molded and toughened by years of danger. Acting on the thought, he hurriedly put on his cloak and went into the street. Except for little strolls in the park, this was the first time he had left the palace since his illness. The day had suddenly changed, clouds covered the sky and the bright sunshine was gone. As Claude strode along at a swift pace, the unwonted exercise gave him a sense of exhilaration. After being confined to his room so long, the whole aspect of things seemed queer and out of proportion.

He had no difficulty in finding Father Barrow's lodgings. Like all the English Jesuits he went under several names and lived a hidden life. His home was with a Mr. Richard Lang-

horne, a lawyer of some note, in Shire Lane near Temple Bar. Father de la Colombiere knew Mr. Langhorne quite well as he managed what business the Jesuits had. He was a fine Catholic gentleman, devout and loyal, and a good hand in legal transactions. Eleven years before he had been arrested as a result of the Great Fire of 1666, for Catholics were accused of being the authors of that calamity, a monstrous libel without any foundation in fact.

Father Barrow welcomed the young priest warmly, a look of pleased surprise supplanting the worried lines of his wrinkled face. He was seventy but today he seemed much older. Claude realized that the arrests of their brother Jesuits bore heavily on the procurator.

"I could not leave England without seeing you," said Claude. "Have you heard from Father Whitbread and the others? He must be near death."

"I have had no news, either from Newgate or Gatehouse, where Father Bedingfield was taken. I do not see how poor Father Whitbread can survive such treatment but Mr. Langhorne has found out indirectly that he is still alive."

"Surely, Father," exclaimed Claude, "there must be something we can do to help them? Would it be possible to see them?"

The old priest shook his head. "There is nothing you or I can do and we would be immediately thrown into prison ourselves if we attempted to visit them."

"If only the Duke or Duchess were here," said Claude, "they would find some means of aiding them."

"Perhaps, but I am certain that many more of us will be arrested before long," said Barrow quietly. "I am sure this house is being watched. You must return to the palace quickly and remain there until you leave. Thank God, you are escaping to France!"

Deeply disappointed, Claude returned home in a carriage which the fatherly old priest had insisted on procuring for

him. It had begun to rain and as he rode through the dismal streets, Claude felt a sense of oppression. He walked to his room with difficulty, he could scarcely get his breath.

That night he awoke to find his pillow drenched with blood. He had suffered a second haemorrhage, more deadly than the first. A servant discovered his condition next morning and, alarmed, sent for Dr. Twombly. "What a misfortune," exclaimed the kindly physician, who had grown very fond of his patient. "He has over-exerted himself in spite of all my warnings. Now he must give up all thought of going home. It would be dangerous to even move him from this room."

All during the reign of terror that descended upon London in the weeks that followed, Claude hovered between life and death. He was only partially conscious of his surroundings and drifted away into a gray and ghostly world punctuated with stabbing flashes of agony. His feeble lips twisted in prayer, but it was difficult, oh so difficult. He was unable to stretch forth a hand, his voice reduced to a whisper. Yet amidst the darkness and confusion and distress of body, his soul stayed close to God. Suffering is the lot of God's holy ones and Claude de la Colombiere was numbered among them.

Outside the quiet walls of his sick room, the city seethed and boiled with the Oates plot. Father Barrow's prediction was fulfilled and within the week both the elderly Jesuit and his protector, Richard Langhorne, were thrown into prison. Daily the arrests mounted. Father Mico, young Father Gavan and Father Turner joined their brothers at Newgate. Thomas Pickering, a Benedictine lay brother, who served the queen's chapel royal, was designated by Oates as one of two assassins chosen by the Jesuits to shoot the King. The other was John Grove. There was no evidence against either man and the queen, knowing the innocence of the venerable brother, publicly announced her

belief in him. But her voice was drowned by the popular clamor and Pickering was thrown into Newgate prison to await trial. Two more Benedictines were accused of planning to stab the King; the queen's physician, Sir George Wakeman, was credited with a scheme to poison him.

Yet in the face of all these and other equally absurd charges, not one clue, not a single piece of evidence nor manifestation of violence on the part of the Catholics was produced. Their only guilt was that they were Catholics attempting to practice and spread their religion. It was inevitable that the Oates plot, built on such flimsy foundation, should collapse unless its victims could be convicted of some startling crime. Realizing this, the instigators of the anti-Catholic persecution planned and executed a diabolic and bloody deed.

On October 12th, two weeks after Oates made his depositions before Sir Edmondbury Godfrey, that magistrate disappeared. Five days later his body was found in a ditch on Primrose Hill in a lonely, wooded part of Hampstead. His throat bore the marks of strangulation, a sword pierced his heart. At the inquest which was held immediately, the unanimous verdict was murder at the hands of the Catholics. Godfrey's body was publicly exposed and venerated as the first Protestant martyr.

Shaftesbury, leader of the Whig party, sprang into action. A state of emergency was declared, a meeting of Parliament called for October 21st. A resolution was rushed through declaring that "there has been and still is a damnable and hellish plot contrived and carried on by Popish recusants, for the assassinating and murdering of the King, and for subverting the Government, and rooting out and destroying the Protestant religion."

One week later the Second Test Act was passed, obliging members of both Houses to subscribe to a declaration that worship according to the Church of Rome was idola-

trous. In the course of the debate in the House of Peers a noble lord was roundly cheered for declaring that he "would not have so much as a Popish man or woman to remain amongst us; not so much as a Popish dog, not so much as a Popish cat." Passage of the act automatically forced twenty-one Catholic peers, a sixth of the House of Lords, to vacate their seats. Five were impeached and incarcerated in the Tower.

The position of the Duke of York was growing more and more precarious. Backed by the Whig party, which detested James to a man because of his Catholicity, Shaftesbury demanded and secured his removal from the Privy Council. A well-organized movement was on foot to banish him and the Duchess. The King was powerless to stem the tide of popular fury or control the Parliament. Distrusted by the Whigs, Charles was far from secure himself. He knew that Shaftesbury and his henchmen had no more belief in a Popish plot than he but that, while hypocritically feigning concern for the royal person, they would, if they could, force him to abdicate or worse.

Much to the disgust of the King, Titus Oates was ensconced splendidly in Whitehall, where he could be readily called to appear before Parliament to testify against the Popish plotters. Parliament publicly thanked him as the saviour of England and granted him a weekly salary and drafts on the Treasury to pay his bills. He was now the most popular man in the realm and large public banquets were arranged in his honor. Oates had assumed the title of Doctor of Divinity, declaring that he had received the degree at Salamanca, although he had never been to that city. Arrayed like a bishop in mitre and cope, he was received by the primate and dined with peers.

Meanwhile London had taken on the aspect of a besieged city, for the hysterical citizenry expected an army of forty thousand French, Spanish and Irish Papists to storm the

capitol and murder all Protestants. Rows of cannon guarded the entrances and encircled the royal palace. Preparations were made for barricading the main thoroughfares, patrols marched through the streets, troops awaited the attack by day and night.

No Protestant considered himself safe unless he was armed. Men carried flails loaded with lead to brain the Popish assassins. Even the women carried pistols concealed in their muffs. The cellars under the House of Parliament were searched for gunpowder. In every corner of the city Catholic homes were ransacked from top to bottom. Papers were seized, religious pictures and objects destroyed. In London alone two thousand Catholics were arrested and thrown into the overcrowded, foul prisons. The frenzy spread throughout England and hundreds of innocent Catholic lay people as well as the Jesuits and the other members of the clergy were apprehended.

The vicious, sanguinary penal laws, which had never been revoked, were now given fresh venom. A reward of one hundred pounds was offered for the capture of any priest or for information leading to his arrest. The amount was equivalent in that age to ten times its present value. All Catholics were banished from London and their property confiscated. Nearly 30,000 innocent men, women and children were driven from their homes throughout the kingdom. The plight of these unfortunates was most tragic. Many poor people died of starvation. Those in prison were cut off from all communication with the outer world and virtually denied the right of trial, for they had no counsel to defend them. The paid informers who appeared against them were recruited from the prisons, the Lord Chief Justice ruling that since they had recently been pardoned none of their previous misdemeanors could be legally admitted as impairing the value of their testimony. Another monstrous principle laid down by Scroggs was that no

Catholic witness could be believed, as it was presumable he had a dispensation to lie.

Among the victims of the rewards offered for Jesuits was Charles Baker, betrayed by a Calvinist Magistrate Arnold at Llantarnam in Monmouthshire. The man had professed friendship for the beloved "Father of the Poor." At Pembroke Castle in Herefordshire, the octogenarian John Kemble, one of the most distinguished members of the Society, was arrested by Captain John Scudamore of Kentchurch and lodged in Hereford jail. He had spent his life on the English missions and now, in his old age, was living with his nephew. The family was among the oldest and most loyal. A cousin, Captain Richard Kemble, had saved the life of the King at the battle of Worcester. Inconceivable that such men should die on the scaffold for non-existent crimes, that a whole nation should be roused to savage retaliation over a mythical revolution!

Snatches of what was happening reached Father de la Colombiere's sick room. He was helpless but resigned to whatever fate might befall him. His body was slowly recuperating but his soul was in a state of anguish. When he thought of his brother priests in jail, he grew sick at heart. Yet out of the black night of spreading evil he was comforted by the thought that the Church and England could be proud of its Jesuits and priests. Laymen, too, of deep faith were ready to meet the issue, even though it meant their deaths. Where the spirit of martyrdom was strong, there was the Blessed Christ Himself.

He was still very weak on a particularly cold, foggy morning, the last day of October. Sunk in lethargy, he was roused by a servant announcing that he had a visitor. Claude nodded assent and glanced up at an elderly man, whom he had never seen before. The stranger was dressed in queer, out-moded clothes, shining with age and cut too large. An enormous white wig surmounted his head.

It was always dangerous in these days to admit a stranger, for one could not tell whether or not he might be an informer. Yet Claude politely waved him to a chair. He had grown accustomed to using signs and gestures as a result of his illness. The visitor did not accept the invitation and looking closer, Claude saw that this man had a remarkable face. His large blue eyes were the most benign in expression the priest had ever seen. His rather wide face, with the rosy cheeks, was most placid. This man bore the outward appearance of a gentle soul. With his vast experience in apprehending saintly persons, Claude immediately felt certain that here was an innately good person.

"Please sit down," he invited. "I am a little tired this morning. The doctor wants me to move as little as possible." His voice though scarcely more than a whisper, was cordial.

The visitor did a surprising thing. Pulling off the big wig, his face broke into a genial smile. "Fooled you completely, Father de la Colombiere," he said. "I'm Father John Wall, the Franciscan from Worcester."

Claude's face lit with pleasure. Of course he had heard of this zealous priest, who had labored under many names for over twenty years. It was like meeting someone he had known for years, friends at a glance.

"I heard about you from a Jesuit friend, Father Turner," explained the friar, taking off his voluminous cloak and sitting down. "I left home more than a fortnight ago to visit the Capuchins at Somerset house and while in London I wanted to see you."

"You have come to London in a very dangerous time," said Claude.

"In all my life I have never seen anything to equal this," answered the Franciscan. "Unfortunately for me, I arrived here on the day of Sir Godfrey's funeral. I was held up by the troops guarding the procession."

"Did they question you?" asked Claude anxiously.

Father Wall shook his head. "No, thank God, my disguise fooled them as readily as it did you. No one noticed me in the crowd except to remark on what a blundering old countryman I was."

"The crowd must be very dense," remarked Claude.

"The largest I have ever seen, Father, and the excitement was intense. Everywhere people were calling Godfrey the first Protestant martyr of the Popish plot. What a horrible lie!"

"Yet people believe it," said Claude sadly. "Some day, let us hope, the truth will come to light and the real murderer be discovered."

For a while they talked of Godfrey's funeral, which was taking place on that last day of October after the body had lain in state since it was discovered two weeks before. Then the Franciscan disclosed the reason for his visit to Father de la Colombiere. "I must tell you before it is too late," he said, "that my soul cannot rest until I know more about the devotion to the Sacred Heart of which you are the apostle."

Claude was amazed and delighted. "Then you have heard of the Sacred Heart devotion in Worcester?" he asked.

"Indeed we have, Father, both from your brother Jesuits and also from lay people who heard of the devotion while they were in London. I myself have spread it to the best of my ability. It is growing far and wide."

Claude's face shone with angelic radiance. So the devotion was growing in England! Despite the precariousness of existence and the tragedy which overshadowed their lives, his heart was flooded with heavenly joy. He rose from his chair and seized the Franciscan's hands. "I am but an agent and a weak one, dear Father, but I shall gladly do my best to tell you all that I know about the Sacred Heart of our Divine Saviour and its boundless love for us."

Father Wall looked entranced. He was profoundly impressed and touched by the appearance of this young

French Jesuit. He saw in the emaciated form a spiritual power which gripped him. He noted the calm indifference to danger as Father de la Colombiere talked. Here was a saint. It was a great privilege to meet such a character. It was like talking to the young Saint John, who had leaned on the Heart of Jesus.

On Claude's part all reticence and hesitation were swept away as he looked into the face of this humble disciple of the Sacred Heart. Words flowed from his lips in a torrent. Though speaking to a single individual, he had never been so eloquent. This would be his only opportunity to impart his knowledge to the friar. Perhaps this might also be his last discourse on the Sacred Heart in England. The realization brought a deep and mystic signification to everything he said. It was like a last will and testament, for his own life was uncertain at best and Father Wall might be apprehended at any moment.

The friar listened in an ecstasy of delight, for never had he heard such revelations of divine love. It was not a dogmatic treatise on the Sacred Heart; it was a rich, vivid, personal narrative of how Father de la Colombiere had become the ambassador of that Heart Divine. Now for the first time he spoke fully of the manifestations to Sister Margaret Mary Alacoque, the humble, obscure Visitation nun in the cloister at Paray-le-Monial.

All day they talked and when night came, Claude made the weary old man lie down and rest. In the early dawn of All Saints Day, he knelt before the altar in the little oratory to the Sacred Heart while the Franciscan celebrated the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

"That is the greatest honor I have ever received," said Father Wall as they breakfasted together. "Like old Simeon I can say 'now, Lord, Thou canst dismiss Thy servant in peace.' To celebrate Mass before the first oratory to the Sacred Heart in England, what a blessed distinction!"

Persecution

Outside the fog thickened. Claude shook Father Wall's hand in farewell. He watched the queer old figure in the huge wig disappear in the dense atmosphere. Somehow, he felt like weeping, as this grand old man was swallowed up in the mists. He would never see him again but would live to hear of his brave death on the scaffold at Worcester.

King's Bench

XXI

One night Claude was unusually melancholy as he thought of his Jesuit brothers in prison, awaiting trial which might well lead them to death on Tyburn Tree. He went to his oratory and prayed earnestly and with such intensity that he forgot himself and the weakness of his body. It was late when he rose from his knees but he did not go to bed, for he was in that state of mental fatigue which banishes sleep. He was still fully dressed in his soutane when he heard a commotion outside, the slamming of a door, voices raised in excitement. Claude paid slight heed, as anything might happen in these times and he had become inured to danger. Besides, having placed himself in God's hands, he had nothing to fear.

There came a thundering crash on his door and his room was suddenly invaded by four men, one a dwarf with leering eyes and huge yellow face. He pointed a finger. "There he is. That's the French Papist."

"Are you Claude de la Colombiere, Frenchman and Jesuit?" questioned the leader, an enormous man with a round pinhead and low brow. His features were brutish and malevolent. He carried a bludgeon.

"I am," answered Claude calmly, "and I am public preacher to Her Highness, the Duchess of York, as well. By what authority do you enter my room in this high-handed fashion?"

"That can do you no good now, you Popish dog," snarled the giant with an obscene oath. "I have a warrant to arrest you for complicity in the hellish plot to assassinate the King, overthrow the Government and destroy the Protestant religion. Put the manacles on him, men."

Silently the priest submitted while the other two executed the order. The leader threw himself into Claude's chair and started rifling the contents of his desk. "Lend a hand here, Trott," he told the dwarf. "We must make a thorough search of the place. Take any papers you find."

They worked with destructive speed, pulling out drawers, overturning chairs and tables. Without bothering to unlock the glass doors of the cabinets, the man in charge splintered them with his bludgeon. The dwarf's face was contorted in an evil grin while he stuffed pockets and pouches with Claude's letters and manuscripts.

"Foreign languages won't save you, priest. We can have them translated."

Claude's face was stern as he gazed fearlessly at them and his slender, erect form actually seemed to grow taller. He was the least excited of any in the room. His quiet dignity enraged his captors, who jostled him rudely through the halls and onto the street. It was cold and the icy wind cut

through his soutane. He was permitted to take nothing with him, not even a cloak or hat.

"You're going to the King's Bench, Jesuit," sneered the leader. "Ah, there's the place for dogs like you—the worst prison in all London." Claude was disappointed, for he was hoping that he might be jailed with some of his brother Jesuits but King's Bench was across the Thames.

The coach jolted over the rough cobblestones and Claude was seized with a violent coughing spell. He struggled for breath, a dark stain dyed his handkerchief.

"Coughing his lungs out," remarked one of the pursuivants. "Another sick Jesuit like the old wretch we had to haul out of their hideout in Wild House."

"Not too sick to hang," cackled the dwarf.

"This one may cheat the gallows," remarked the other pursuivant callously.

At length the coach stopped and by the shifting light of torches Father de la Colombiere was led into the jail. The awful stench of the building was overpowering. He glimpsed the harsh faces of bailiffs and guards. "We've a very special guest for you tonight, Flint," said the big man with heavy sarcasm, prodding Claude with his bludgeon to guide him towards the jailer. "The chaplain to the Duchess of York, a Frenchman and a Jesuit, no less, and emissary of the devil, if ever there was."

Flint's small eyes brightened. "Chaplain to the Duchess, you say? Then he'll rate a cell to himself." The cost of this privilege was a shilling a day, which the jailer pocketed. Prisoners like de la Colombiere could be profitable, for everything was paid by them and all returns became the property of the jailer. There was no salary attached to the post so it was to his interest to charge as much as possible.

Claude's walk to his cell was like a journey through hell. Masses of prisoners—drunkards, thieves, prostitutes—were packed into foul, airless dungeons that teemed with

vermin. Many were diseased and covered with loathsome sores, some lay on straw pallets, their eyes staring, their cheeks flushed from malignant typhus, called jail fever, which carried off three times as many as were transported or hanged. As the Jesuit passed by in his black soutane, hoarse voices cursed him or shrieked ribald obscenities.

At the end of a dark passage the jailer took a huge key from his pocket. Claude was thrust into a small cell. In the dim light from the corridor, he saw three immense rats scurrying over the filthy stone floor. There were no furnishings except a pile of rotting straw in a corner. Quickly he was fettered with iron chains on hands and feet. The door slammed, the key turned in the lock. Another paroxysm of coughing seized Claude and he sank to the floor. The hollow sound echoed against the grim, dank walls. Darkness descended upon him.

When he regained consciousness, Claude saw a faint glimmer of light. He dragged himself to the straw pallet. It was no filthier than the rest of the floor and provided some protection from the cold of the stone flags. He propped himself against the wall and began reciting his rosary. The grating of a key in the rusty lock broke his prayer. It was a new guard. "His Royal Highness the Duke of York has sent a messenger to inquire after your needs. What do you want?"

Father de la Colombiere said quickly. "Tell the messenger to fetch my breviary to me at once, also pens and paper."

"I knew it," exclaimed a mocking voice from the shadows and Trott, the dwarf, appeared beside the guard. "Pens and paper! These Jesuit rogues cannot be stopped even in prison."

"You can't eat paper," said the guard. "Better order some proper victuals. You get nothing here but bread and water."

"Thank you, I'm not hungry," answered Claude and,

indeed, the thought of food in the nauseous place was unbearable. "Is there any news, any other message?"

"There is," gloated the dwarf, raising his voice to a shrill yell. "The vile traitor, Coleman, hangs at Tyburn with the Jesuit dog, Mico. Don't distress yourself, you'll be the next."

"That can't be true," cried de la Colombiere. "I couldn't believe such a monstrous miscarriage of justice could—"

The dwarf began jumping up and down with delight over the effect of his news, which unbelievable though it seemed, was true. "On the third day of December in this year of Our Lord, 1678," he chanted, "the first of the Popish plotters will be hung, drawn and quartered." He paused and added significantly, "The first—but not the last to swing, I promise you."

Two days later Father de la Colombiere learned with great sadness of the executions of Father Mico and Edward Coleman. The former he knew but slightly, they had met only during the synod. But Coleman had been close to him—poor, impulsive, devoted Coleman, so badly wrong about everything, so lost in bright dreams that he could not rightly judge actual conditions! Messengers arrived from the Duke and Duchess, stealthily and furtively like wrong doers; they told Claude of the appalling injustice of the trials of Father Mico and Coleman. Hired perjurers had testified to incredible charges that had no foundation in reality. Not a shred of real evidence was introduced but there were, unfortunately, many long letters which the secretary had written to prominent French Jesuits which had been intercepted. These indiscreet and unsolicited messages contained elaborate accounts of Coleman's activities to further the cause of Catholicism in England, his optimistic views and enthusiastic predictions for the future. Though harmless, they were presented in such a distorted and altered manner as to condemn him in the eyes of the

judge who was only too willing to be persuaded of his guilt and the guilt of the Jesuit tried with him.

In vain had the Duke and Duchess of York implored the King to stay the executions. "I cannot pardon them, for I dare not," was his answer. And, indeed, he was powerless to save the victims of the homicidal madness that had taken possession of the English people. The mob which attended the trial had roared its approval of the calumnies of Oates and his confederates, had interrupted the proceedings again and again to demand the execution of the prisoners.

Father de la Colombiere had no time to recover from the news of the executions when his own hour came and he was taken before the Marquis of Winchester to be examined. There were no friendly faces in the Lower Hall, grim courtroom where the prisoners in chains and under guard were arraigned for preliminary hearing. Among the throng of curious sightseers was not one Catholic, for none dared to appear in public lest he be seized. Claude saw only enemies, who derided him with brutal epithets as he took his place on the prisoners' bench to await his turn. There was no pity for his gaunt, bearded face, his racked, emaciated frame, his kindly brown eyes, hollowed by suffering and hunger.

"The Jesuit, Claude de la Colombiere, to the bar," shouted a bailiff. And now there was a stir as a side door opened and a squat, paunchy man of about thirty, dressed in episcopal garb, swaggered before the magistrate. Claude had never seen Titus Oates but knew that this grotesque creature with the small, shifting eyes, and purple face and brutal jaw must be he. Prepared though he was, yet the sight was a shock, for this being was more than ugly and misshapen, he was repulsive in an evil and horrible way. Behind him came a younger man whose handsome, untrustworthy face bore the marks of dissipation. He was William Bedloe, a professional informer and unscrupulous

adventurer whose many aliases had not kept him from acquiring an unsavoury prison record.

The examination was a shameful burlesque of justice. The Marquis, his beribboned wig contrasting with his red countenance, listened in acquiescent silence while Oates thundered and bellowed a fierce denunciation of the Jesuit. Obviously, he expected to intimidate this pale, worn Frenchman who looked so desperately ill. But de la Colombiere's eyes were unflinching and the calm nobility of his bearing expressed his innocence of any wrong. To accuse such as he of murder and violence would seem absurd but no absurdity was too great for Oates and his confederate. However, they confined their specific charges to twelve points, covering his priestly activities and containing not a shred of evidence that could link him with the bogus plot.

Oates produced a bundle of letters and papers, from which he quoted with a great show of triumph. Finally as the climax of his indictment he pointed his finger in the Jesuit's face and, raising his peculiar voice, dramatically cried: "Claude de la Colombiere, you have not fouled those delicate pale hands with blood. Not you, for cunning French Jesuits are much too clever for that. But you have done worse, you wolf in sheep's clothing! You have schemed with Satanic guile to bring about the assassination of Our Beloved King at the hands of his own people. You have tried to turn all England against him by asserting that His Majesty is a Catholic at heart. Dare you deny that you have said this? Answer, or may your silence prove your guilt."

Oates was deliberately rousing the crowd, and the packed courtroom, which had only mildly demonstrated its hostility up to this point, suddenly exploded in an uproar of shouts, curses and catcalls. The Marquis, who had grown accustomed to such disorders pounded his gavel with mechanical regularity. "Answer, Jesuit, answer," cried

several voices throughout the room and someone at the rear yelled: "Treason, treason."

Father de la Colombiere quietly looked from one angry face to another and as a sudden hush fell over the mob, he turned his eyes on his accuser and spoke for the first time in his slow, careful English. His voice was like the clear, bold strokes of a bell. "You bring shame on England's people by insinuating that they would murder their King if he merely thought of becoming a Catholic. You have lived with the Society of Jesus and know that its members could never hatch such monstrous crimes as you have invented. The Popish Plot does not exist only in your false and wicked imagination."

The effect of this totally unexpected rejoinder was startling. Oates was discomfited and at a loss for words. The odious creature had a strange feeling that the crowd had suddenly turned against him, an incredible thing to happen now at the height of his success. In spite of himself, he dropped his eyes before the Jesuit's.

Bedloe came forward with evidence against the accused that he had celebrated Mass in places other than the Chapel Royal at St. James Palace, that he had taken the sacraments to private homes in London, that he had converted many British subjects to Catholicism. There was other information against him, showing that he had helped Catholic young men and women to escape abroad where they might prepare themselves for the religious life and also that he had smuggled a number of English priests out of the country to Maryland. Would he admit his guilt?

Claude declined to answer for he was unwilling to compromise his friends. Bedloe swore and threatened. Oates resumed his bullying manner. But the Jesuit continued to regard them with a silent composure that was fully as impressive as his open avowal.

Oates waddled closer and wagged his head ominously.

He was preparing his master stroke. This Jesuit must be crushed and he was certain that he could confound him and break down his resistance by a carefully planned denouement. "Your silence will not help you, Papist," he sneered. "May it please your honor, I now produce the crown's chief witness on whose sworn evidence this arch plotter was arrested. He is not an Englishman but blood brother to the prisoner, a Frenchman and former servant of Monsieur de la Colombiere—Olivier Fiquet."

There was a murmur of interest through the courtroom and necks craned for a sight of the witness, who came quickly forward, was duly sworn and took his place. Claude looked at Fiquet but the man never once met his eyes. He could not face the one who had befriended him so generously and trusted him so completely.

Oates marched up and down on his crooked legs, the boards creaking under his weight. Possessed of enormous vanity, he considered himself if not the handsomest at least the most fascinating and magnetic person in the world. He was perennially showing off, constantly trying to impress. He grinned knowingly at the crowd as though letting them in on a tremendous secret as he ordered Fiquet to proceed with his story. He called on him to translate passages from Claude's private correspondence, pretending to read a double meaning into the letters from his Superior in France. Pious generalities were made to assume a sinister menace to the English government. In the course of the examination, he asked: "Were you a member of the Church of Rome when you entered the service of the defendant?"

"Never, I swear it, Dr. Oates," disclaimed Fiquet hurriedly. "My people were Huguenots and when they came to England, they joined the Established Church."

"Did the defendant try to coerce you into abjuring the true faith?" continued Oates.

"He did, Dr. Oates. He threatened me with death unless I became a Papist."

Oates looked around with a gratified smirk. "Tell us in your own words what you know of his connection with the fiendish Popish plot in addition to these letters which clearly link him with the Pope of Rome and the French Jesuits."

"He was constantly plotting with the traitor Edward Coleman and I did hear him say many times that the hour was at hand for a great change in England."

"What else did you hear and see while you were in the employ of the defendant?"

"I saw Bedingfield and Whitbread and other Jesuits coming secretly to his chambers. I heard them plan the destruction of the Protestant religion and the overthrow of the Government."

"Why did you leave the employ of de la Colombiere?"

"He dismissed me when he suspected that I knew too much," said Fiquet, adding with hypocritical righteousness, "and he was angry because he could not induce me to renounce my God and my adopted country, which I love like a born Englishman and will never betray."

The crowd burst into a roar of applause and Fiquet retired with cheers for himself, the King and England. A second witness was called, another French renegade whom Father de la Colombiere had never seen until now. He corroborated everything Fiquet had said. The changeable mob was again with Oates and, quick to sense his advantage, he gathered up his papers and announced: "The crown rests, your honor. The evidence proves that the French Jesuit is as guilty as his English brethren."

"Then let him hang with them at Tyburn," cried a man in the crowd.

"He'll swing like the traitors Coleman and Mico," shouted another voice.

The tide of hate and fury was rising again and Claude saw a mass of scowling faces surging towards him. He stood his ground. The Marquis pounded his gavel and roared for order. "The court finds the evidence sufficient to hold the accused for trial before the Lord Chief Justice for complicity in the Popish Plot. Bailiffs, return him to prison."

He was certain now that he would die as had Father Mico and Edward Coleman. How strange an ending, yet it must be the will of God. He wondered a little who would take his place in propagating the devotion to the Sacred Heart or how his untimely death would affect it. What better destiny than to die for His Master? A martyr—it was a breath-taking thought. Surely he must be among the favored to deserve this blessed opportunity. And since God wanted him for a martyr, God would give him the grace to sustain the terrible ordeal of Tyburn. He hoped that he would not die in prison, for he did not want to lose the imperishable crown of the martyr.

In the confined space of the verminous cell, his only companions the rats, Claude's thoughts were intensified. He saw himself borne along the road to Tyburn, perhaps beside him in the cart of ignominy would ride Father Bedingfield, that valiant soul to whom he had become so deeply attached during these years together. The way would be lined with curious and brutal people. At Tyburn they would be hanged by the neck, while the favored, who had the price, enjoyed the spectacle from their seats in the stands. Their lifeless bodies would be drawn and quartered. But that could not affect their immortal souls and Claude took courage as he thought of Calvary and after Calvary the Resurrection. Oh, the wonder and the glory of heaven! His sufferings would be only for a little while but heaven was forever and forever. There he would rest in the Sacred Heart of the Saviour and be eternally at peace. It was a

blessed and stimulating thought. A martyr, what had he done to merit such a death?

Any day the summons might come for trial with the inevitable conviction and execution. Meanwhile, the Duchess sent her Italian confessor to see him. "Be of good hope, Father de la Colombiere," he whispered. "The Duke and Duchess dare not help you openly but they have not been idle."

"Hope?" Claude repeated the word as if it had no meaning. "Why should I hope?"

"The Duke has been to the King and the French Ambassador is in touch with the King of France. If Louis demands—"

"Say no more, dear Father," interrupted Claude gently. "All this is well meant and I am deeply grateful, I assure you. But I dare not expect any justice in this reign of terror. The Duke himself is in grave danger. Why should I escape the fate of my fellow Jesuits?"

"True, you are a Jesuit," countered the other, "but you are also a Frenchman. There you have the advantage, my friend."

Claude had to smile in spite of his tragic circumstances. "Oh, never call that advantage in this barbarous land!"

"You shall see," predicted Father Galli, returning his smile.

"The future rests with God," said Claude tranquilly. "In any event I shall not be here long." The visitor knew what he meant for a deadly pallor shadowed his wasted face and he was coughing and spitting blood with growing frequency.

"He bears up wonderfully, Your Grace," the confessor told Mary Beatrice. "I have never seen such courage. He even seems happy in that unspeakably foul dungeon. I believe he would rejoice to die for the Faith. There is a strange expectancy on his face, an eager light in his eyes."

"Father de la Colombiere is a saint," replied the Duchess fervently, "he must not—shall not—hang. I am confident that Louis will protect the rights of a French subject. Charles has urged him to intervene."

The King of England need not have interceded for the French priest who had tried to save his soul and, in trying, gained his admiration and regard. Louis XIV, when advised by the French Ambassador at London that the trusted and invaluable Jesuit whom he had sent to England was a victim of the Oates' plot, indignantly demanded his instant release. Not daring to become involved in international litigation with such an adversary, Parliament ruled that Father de la Colombiere should be banished instead of executed. He was given a brief parole in the care of the Duke of York to regain his strength for the voyage home.

France again and freedom! The thought made his heart beat high and sent the blood coursing joyously to his pale cheeks. But sad news awaited him at St. James. On the same hour that he was released from King's Bench on that morning of December 21, 1678, Father Bedingfield had breathed his last in his cell at Newgate. The sufferings he had endured in that horrible prison were more than his aging body could sustain.

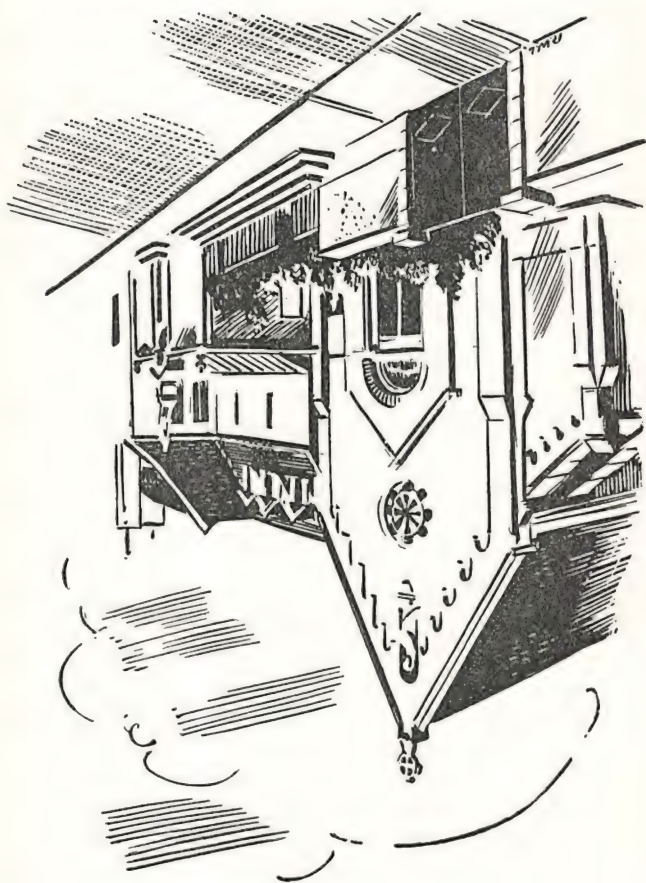
"He was a great Englishman," said the Duke weeping unashamedly, "when these dreadful times have passed he will emerge as a hero and patriot. I'm glad he cheated the infamy of the gallows. I can close my eyes and see him waiting on the wounded and dying when the Dutch were raking our ship with bullets. Better had he died in that glorious hour."

Everything was arranged for Claude's departure. When the day came, he was still extremely weak but eager for the journey. The Duke and Duchess bade him a fond goodbye. "We may be following you soon, if we are lucky," said James as he clasped his hand. "My days in

England are numbered. Perhaps we shall meet again."

"May God keep you in the Sacred Heart, Father," murmured Mary Beatrice. "I shall never cease spreading the devotion you have taught me."

A guard accompanied him to Dover and saw him safely aboard the boat to Calais. Claude watched until the white cliffs vanished into the lowering grey skies. The sea was lonely, the lapping of waters, the wild cry of the gulls matched his frame of mind. He had failed in his mission, Charles had not become a Catholic. And behind that dark, disappearing horizon his brothers lay in English jails, awaiting cruel deaths on English scaffolds. He was profoundly dejected. His own life was finished, he could not live long. The King's Bench had put the hand of death upon him. As he turned away, a curious rush of warm feeling oddly came over him. All was not lost—he had left something, something precious behind him, something that would not die—devotion to the Sacred Heart.



Wait till the End of Time

Exile's Return

XXII

February was almost over, the skies grey and bleak, stretched above snow-covered mountains. The winds, cold and sharp, blew across the great Abbey and down through the winding streets of Paray-le-Monial. The parish church of St. Nicolas and the Jesuit chapel were shrouded in white. The children's playground at the Visitation Convent was deserted. Old timers, glancing at the lowering clouds, shook their heads and predicted a blizzard. In the tavern men, crowding close to the roaring fire, discussed with unusual excitement the latest news which both disturbed and thrilled the little town.

Father de la Colombiere was back in Paray. The famous Jesuit, more famous than ever now because of his experi-

ences in England, had arrived the night before at the Jesuit House. But he was a very sick man and could see no one and the first burst of happiness was tinged with melancholy over the discovery. Many recalled that the beloved priest was none too strong when he left and the detestable English fogs and worst of all his imprisonment, had brought him to this desperate state.

In the nearby cloister, Sister Margaret Mary received the news with mixed but profound emotions. There was no soul in Paray to whom Father de la Colombiere's return meant more than to the mystical daughter of the Sacred Heart, no soul that had experienced even in a feeble way the same spiritual union that bound them together. It was only two and a half years since their parting, yet it seemed a lifetime to the nun, for tragic events had taken place since he went away. How far away that beautiful June day when they had knelt before the Blessed Sacrament and pledged their vows to the Sacred Heart! Looking back on that Feast of the Sacred Heart, she recalled how only a few weeks later, her mother had died. Margaret Mary had not seen her in five years but the separation had only increased her sense of grievous loss. Childhood memories oppressed her heart with their heavy burden of sadness—recollections of the sufferings they had endured together, of her mother's absorbing love and final renunciation. It was almost terrifying to realize that she was gone now, laid to rest in the family tomb at Verosvres, and she could never again look upon that beloved face. Father Antoine had officiated at the funeral, but scarcely a year later, he, too, had died and was buried in the ancestral resting place of the Alacoques. Margaret Mary felt that second loss keenly, for the good cure had been a real father and she loved him dearly.

The family had narrowed to three, Chrysostom, Jacques and herself, but they were closer now than ever. Lhaute-

cour had become for the brothers a place of forlorn and haunting sorrow, the halls and rooms were now so empty. Chrysostom and his family were not long leaving the old home. Besides his legal activities had gradually overshadowed the country gentleman way of life. It was to his advantage to settle in some town, where his outstanding ability as a lawyer could win recognition. He removed to Bois-Sainte-Marie where he served as judge and later as permanent mayor. Jacques, who had been his uncle's assistant, might have succeeded him as pastor of the village church at Verosvres but preferred to be near his elder brother. He became the pastor of the parish church at Bois-Sainte-Marie.

Besides these family changes, there was another and most trying change. During the past year Mother de Saumaise had gone to Dijon and Mother Peronne-Rosalie Greyfie had succeeded her at Paray. The new mother was not only incredulous of the mystic's revelations but found her most annoying. She was an unusual character with a singular background. She knew nothing of the world beyond the cloister and had no experience other than that acquired within convent walls, for she had come to the nuns as a very small orphan. She was a rigid disciplinarian, firm, direct, even severe, and she was sincerely convinced that it was her duty to oppose and openly humiliate Margaret Mary. On the other hand, that humble and obedient nun was nevertheless certain that God not only communicated with her in the most intimate manner but that He had sent "His faithful servant and perfect friend" to reassure and encourage her. And so began the old struggle all over again. Fundamentally it was the same but the opposing forces were stronger and consequently the tensivity increased in this spiritual combat.

Now that Father de la Colombiere had returned a holy impatience to see and talk with him seized Margaret Mary.

It would not be long now, for the nuns learned that he was much better and would soon be able to visit the convent. He would tell her then of his efforts to spread the devotion to the Sacred Heart and on her side, she had much to reveal to him. Except for the few messages she had received through Mother de Saumaise while he was away, there had been no communication between them.

The convent was a scene of excitement when Father de la Colombiere arrived. The nuns were hurrying to their stalls behind the grille, the academy pupils were filing into the chapel. In a few moments they would hear from the eloquent Jesuit the terrible story of the persecution in England, especially of the Jesuit Fathers and his own frightful ordeal in prison. Sister Margaret Mary took her place with the other nuns. Although seven years in the religious life, she sat by Mother Greyfie's order the last of the professed, like a conventual outcast.

There was a breathless hush as the priest came slowly, very slowly to the altar and knelt for a brief prayer. He turned and Sister Margaret experienced a pang of sympathy. He was changed shockingly. His face was a bluish pallor with deep hollows. When he spoke, his voice was low and husky. Gone the rich, eloquent tones, the musical rise and fall of inflection, the vigorous gestures. He spoke slowly and with an effort, his movements were few and his hands pitifully wasted. The orator had been lost in the saint. Despite the physical ravages, his words were more spiritual, more touching than ever. In the eyes that appeared immensely large and luminous in the sunken face there glowed an inexpressible light. He was a soul seared by suffering, consumed by agonizing experience. He was sublime.

There was no sound in the chapel, even the children kept still, save for the husky voice which entranced the listeners. Of his own arrest and imprisonment, Father de la Colombiere had little to say, dismissing his part in the persecution

with a mere passing reference. But of his brothers, the English Jesuits he told a profoundly moving story. "I beg you to pray for those I left in such deep trouble," he said. "They are worthy of your zeal and compassion, for they suffer much and display an admirable constancy." Since his banishment and return to France, another noble Jesuit, William Ireland, had been executed at Tyburn and with him, faithful John Grove, who had said: "We are innocent, we lose our lives wrongfully, we pray God to forgive them that are the causes of it."

His listeners could almost hear the martyr's final plea and see the hangman in the crimson dress of his grim office, flinching perhaps for a moment before those words of Christ-like forgiveness.

And then this man who had suffered and seen so much took them with him to Newgate prison, where the dying provincial, Father Whitbread, still lingered on. Four brother Jesuits, William Barrow, John Fenwick, Anthony Turner and John Gavan, were awaiting with him their execution, for all had been condemned to die on June 20. It would be the first anniversary of Father Gavan's ordination. And in Stafford jail a kindly, frail man in his eighties, Father Nevill, was found dead on a pile of straw one icy February morning.

Of these and many more, both religious and lay people, Father de la Colombiere told, describing the persecution which now held all England in its grasp and was spreading into Wales and Ireland. It was a fascinating but horrible story and the speaker as well as his audience was shaken by the memories it recalled. Yet the horror must be told so that the faithful in other lands might aid by their prayers and profit by the glorious example of the English martyrs.

After he had finished and blessed them in Benediction, Father de la Colombiere turned with a sense of escape to the thought of his long awaited reunion with Sister Mar-

garet Mary. To speak again to one so consecrated to God, to one whose prayers had supported him in the ordeals of his English sojourn, what a privilege and cause for gratitude! His step quickened as he entered the parlor, anticipation smiled in his eyes.

As a matter of form, the visitor first sought the permission of the mother superior before asking for Sister Alacoque. His request was somewhat perfunctory, for he naturally assumed that it would be readily granted. To his surprise Mother Greyfie did not answer immediately but looked at him in silence with a critical and penetrating expression. "That I cannot grant, Reverend Father," she answered finally. Her voice was low but clear and there was no mistaking the disapproval in its flat, icy tones.

Father de la Colombiere half rose from his chair with astonishment. He could scarcely believe what he had heard. After years of separation he was to be denied the consolation of speaking to this soul whom God had confided to his care and direction. "May I ask the reason for your refusal, Reverend Mother?" he inquired courteously although his expression revealed his indignation.

The mother did not flinch, if anything her face became more adamant. "Sister Alacoque may speak to you in the confessional," went on the inexorable voice. "The sisters are making their preparation in the chapel."

Father Colombiere restrained the protest which was rising within his breast. Wiser not to argue with this superior who seemed so unnaturally harsh. To talk with Sister Alacoque was the main object and the confessional might suffice, indeed it might be the better place. There, due to his priestly office and the nature of the Sacrament of Penance, the atmosphere would be reverential, sacred. It was difficult to understand Mother Greyfie's hostility but since she had so decreed, he was certain that Sister Margaret Mary would want their meeting to be this way.

As he walked to the chapel, he was thinking of Mother Greyfie. He had heard that she was a rigid disciplinarian but had not supposed that she would be so extreme. Little hints dropped now and then, remarks of good, simple Pere Michon, the convent chaplain, passed through his mind. Was Sister Margaret Mary suffering the old misunderstandings, the persecutions of her earlier days? Was this superior blind to her heroic virtue and supernatural gifts? If so, he would find out. His joy was clouded and serenity of soul left him. This obstacle was so unexpected. All the way on the rugged journey to Paray he had contemplated his reunion with the seraphic nun. What revelation would she make? And above all, what wish of the Sacred Heart was he to carry out?

Now the glorious design of infinite, divine love was being opposed by the animosity of the mother. He had even pictured himself kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament with the chosen apostle of the Sacred Heart, renewing their old pledge taken before he departed. He must control himself and not let disappointment or anger take possession. He must not permit his thoughts to dwell upon that incomprehensible woman, Mother Greyfie! How could she sit in judgment on Sister Alacoque!

In the darkened, shadowy light of the confessional a penitent was approaching. Now he would hear that voice which had talked directly to the Heart of Jesus. His own heart stirred in exaltation. It was not Sister Margaret Mary but the youthful, strange voice of a novice. Was this done intentionally by the superior to keep him waiting, possibly in the hope that he might fail to recognize Sister Alacoque, which would make their meeting nothing more than a sacramental routine?

Yet when she entered the confessional, he was instantly aware of her presence. And besides themselves, another, a Presence was there, a Third Person. An ecstatic emotion

radiated through him. He could almost feel the beat of that Heart upon which John had rested.

He found out that Margaret Mary had gone on in grace. The union between her heart and the Sacred Heart was closer than ever. He gazed into new spiritual heights. To suffer and to love—the words were flaming beacons, lighting the way to the Cross and that Broken Heart.

The confession was over. How long it had taken, Father de la Colombiere did not know, for time had been forgotten. He sank back in his seat as another nun came in. Two more followed and then a novice knocked on the door to let him know that no more would be confessed. He left the confessional and knelt before the altar. He was very tired but he murmured a few words of thanks to the Hidden God of the Tabernacle.

Slowly he walked back to the Jesuit residence, his soul singing with happiness. Today he had learned new lessons in sanctity. Despite his weak condition, he was hopeful for the future. Tomorrow he would talk to the mother superior about Sister Alacoque but for the present he did not care to think of that. All would be well with Sister Margaret Mary.

The community room was slightly astir that night in the Visitation convent, for Mother Greyfie indicated that she had something important to declare. Sister Alacoque was summoned before her. This was not the first time she had been pointed out to the community.

"I have repeatedly told you, Sister Margaret Mary," began the superior, "that you must avoid being singular. It grieves me deeply that you never seem to reform. It is against the express wishes of the community and its holy rule that any nun be different from others. We are molded in the same pattern. This afternoon you grievously disobeyed that regulation by remaining over an hour in the confessional. Such singularity convinces me that you con-

sider yourself worthy of special attention and deserves this severe rebuke!"

An hour in the confessional, it was incredible! It had seemed but a fleeting moment. For herself she had no regrets, this humiliation was just another opportunity to suffer for her Saviour. Now, however, Father de la Colombiere was part of her trial. She had brought him into her own wretched orbit. That deeply wounded her heart. In all her great difficulties he had been her father and friend. Her distress was insupportable. Tears trembled at her eyelids and it took an extraordinary effort to control her emotion. There was nothing she could do or say. With bowed head she remained silent beneath the withering castigation of the mother superior.

Father de la Colombiere was not kept long in ignorance of what had happened. The following day Abbe Michon dropped in to see him and to Father de la Colombiere's consternation, related the humiliating circumstances of Sister Alacoque's public reprimand. He made no comment but he was acutely disturbed, blaming himself for the nun's trial. Instead of resting as Dr. Billet prescribed, he immediately set forth for the convent.

Again he sat opposite the mother superior and again their glances met. After the brief greeting Father de la Colombiere continued to look into the nun's bird-like eyes without speaking. It almost seemed as if there were something baleful in their hard depths yet they were direct to the point of candor. With his deep psychological insight, the priest was trying to penetrate to the mind behind that steely coldness. It was like trying to plow a field of boulders. He experienced the impact of meeting an insurmountable barrier. This old woman with the thin-lipped deeply-lined face and high-bridged, imperious nose would not yield to kindly direction. He must use force, she would never yield to persuasion.

It was quite within the bounds of possibility that she was more the ascetic than the Christian. He determined to find out. He remembered the haughty nuns of Port Royal, so permeated with Jansenism that their Bishop had said of them: "They are as pure as angels and as proud as devils." Yet Mother Greyfie did not seem to fall into that category. Ascetic, yes, beyond question, and completely sincere. Probably in secret she was harder with herself than those she ruled.

"I came to see you about Sister Alacoque," he said. "It has come to my knowledge that your treatment of her is most unreasonable and even cruel."

The mother's face betrayed not the slightest surprise at this statement. "As mother superior of this convent, Reverend Father," she replied, "I try to do what is right. Sister Alacoque is a visionary and it is very difficult to put up with her ways. She is a source of disorder."

"A visionary!" exclaimed Father de la Colombiere, his eyes flashing, "yes, that is true, Mother Greyfie, but not as you intend it. She is one of God's elect to whom He reveals Himself."

"How can I know her revelations are from God? Is it not possible the devil is the cause of her wild fancies?"

"You are a foolish woman, Mother Greyfie," continued the priest, "if you harbor such a false opinion. There is no sign of the evil one in Sister Alacoque's case. 'By their fruits ye shall know them,' said our Divine Saviour. The devil would indeed be deceiving himself in trying to deceive Sister Alacoque. You cannot deny that she is humble, completely obedient when ordered to do something, mortified to an extraordinary degree. Can you, dare you, call these virtues the products of the evil one?"

Mother Greyfie remained silent for a moment, impressed but not convinced. "No, Reverend Father, such qualities must come from above," she admitted, "but it is quite evi-

dent that Sister Alacoque permits her imagination to roam at random—”

Father de la Colombiere interrupted her with a gesture and the look which he turned on her was the sternest she had seen since her novice days. “Such a judgment of so holy a person would indicate a strongly prejudiced mind,” he said, “and completely at variance with your predecessor here. Mother de Saumaise was convinced that Sister Alacoque’s revelations were authentic.”

“Other members of the community, who have known Sister Alacoque since she entered, have no faith in her,” answered the mother superior.

“Then the devil is doing his work among them,” said Father de la Colombiere. “As her spiritual director and as a priest of God I tell you, Mother Greyfie, that Sister Margaret Mary is a saint and lives on a higher plane than is given to ordinary mortals like you and me to understand.”

Mother Greyfie was startled out of her graven composure and her face turned pale. “God forbid that I have misjudged her,” she exclaimed, her voice trembling.

“Be thankful to Him now for making you see the error of your ways,” said the priest, rising. “Your convent harbors a heroic soul which shall in God’s good time be raised to her altars. The day will come when Paray-le-Monial will be a shrine erected through her love for the Sacred Heart of our Divine Lord.” There was a prophetic light in his eyes, his voice was like the sound of a trumpeting angel.

Suddenly the superior’s troubled face was transformed by a look of joy and relief. Father de la Colombiere’s reasoning had pierced her mind and like Saul on the road to Damascus she was instantly converted. The victory was overwhelming in its abruptness and the surrender almost abject. There was a pleading look on her face as she said: “May God forgive me, Father de la Colombiere. I have been blind, oh so wilfully blind. And can you forgive me?”

"Behold This Heart"

The priest smiled a happy, gentle smile. He had been correct in surmising that the mother superior was honest, that until this very moment she had simply not believed in Sister Margaret Mary.

"Blind Bartimeus at Jericho's gate received his sight, Mother Greyfie," he said softly. "God has permitted you to see a daughter beloved of the same Holy One Who gave the blind beggar his sight."

"Then we are friends?" inquired the nun in faltering tones. "You are not angry with me?"

"Of course not. We are friends, yes, friends in the Heart of Jesus."

When Father de la Colombiere left for Lyons after ten days at Paray, he was happy in the knowledge that he had not failed Sister Margaret Mary in her need. Once again he had been sent to console and defend her and he was certain that Our Lord was guiding him. What further unfolding of the devotion to His Divine Heart the future might contain was still wholly in the hands of God. He had succeeded in this special mission and for the time he was extremely content.

For Eternity

XXIII

It was early June. Warm sunshine flooded the filbert grove, making a bright emerald sheen on the green leaves and burnishing the strong boughs to a rich hue. Overhead, lacy clouds flecked the azure of the sky like dainty filigree work. From the nut grove came the shrill cries of children at play. On a bench beneath one of the larger trees sat Sister Alacoque, reading a letter from Father de la Colombiere, an extraordinary and a pathetic epistle but in keeping with his unusual character. In the written words was revealed the soul of this heroic Jesuit and his immense spirituality. It was over two years since Margaret Mary had seen him in the flesh but as she read on, he seemed to step from the pages and stand before her. She could see his wan counte-

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nance and hear his low voice, grown husky from the ravages of consumption.

The loud, unrestrained laughter of the children sounded far, far away, their quick, light movements scarcely apprehended, for her mind was on her director and friend. The great distance which separated them was suddenly spanned, as if she had thrown off the limits of the body like an incorporeal spirit with angelic powers. This astounding quality was nothing new to Sister Margaret Mary. It was both a source of ecstasy and grief to her. Most of her difficulties could be traced to this amazing faculty, which the ordinary mortal could never even remotely understand. It was the cause of continual misunderstanding by her companions, for often she appeared obtuse and insensate while her spirit was roaming undreamed heights.

She began reading certain passages of the letter, the words sinking deeply into her mind. "Alas, I live in a strange way and feel that the regrets I am conscious of and the complaints I make are very far from justifying me before God. Indeed, they increase my guilt. In my heart I long to do more work to expiate my sins and glorify our beloved Master. But I fear that in my present state these are only illusions and that Our Lord judges me unworthy to do anything for love of Him."

There was in these sentences unutterable sadness, a song of despair, of a strong spirit in chains. Bound and fettered by disease, he looked out upon fair fields, rich with the harvest, yet could not stir a hand. A brooding darkness shadowed his vast designs. In the depths of his profound humility he was tempted to think that God had found him wanting. It was not an appeal for her sympathy but a statement torn from an anguished heart.

But he did have her sympathy and with her gifted, enlightened mind she quickly discerned that, despite the complaints of sadness, he was not vanquished, but he was an

unconquerable soul. She knew and understood him; what she did not know at present was that from now on, she was to lead, she was to rescue. Through divine providence, their positions had become reversed.

And further on, she read: "I find one good thing in my present state, a deep misery, both interior and exterior. I realize that this is an inestimable treasure." Here was a great, fundamental spiritual truth which the friend of the Sacred Heart had learned by living a devout life. Never to have visions, always to be denied sweetness of soul, such had been the lot of Father de la Colombiere. Yet his indomitable soul had fiercely met every adversity. Devoid of consolation, he still struggled on. This Sister Margaret Mary fully comprehended.

As she folded the letter and put it away, her mind retraced the happenings since Father de la Colombiere had left Paray after that last brief visit. No one thought that he could have lived so long. He had stayed for a while in his childhood home in the little town of St. Symphorien d'Ozon with his brother and family. Here in the large sprawling house with its tree-bordered park and fresh, invigorating air, he had regained some measure of health. He had returned to Lyons and the Grand College, where the rector had assigned to him light tasks, spiritual father of the young scholastics and confessor to the sodality. These duties were in contrast with his hazardous, prominent life at the court of Charles II, yet humble and hidden as they were, they afforded him the opportunity to plant the seeds of devotion to the Sacred Heart in these select and innocent souls. He would never see the harvest of this sowing but there was satisfaction in its doing. He was like a man planting a tree for a future generation.

But even the simple role Father de la Colombiere enacted was too much for his waning strength. During his second year at Lyons he had collapsed. A series of haemor-

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rhages, the most violent on Easter, 1681, almost deprived him of life. Weeks passed as he slowly fought his way back. He was still very weak when Sister Margaret Mary received her letter. If he continued to improve, he would come to Paray. His work was over, from now on his superiors were concerned only with his health. But Sister Margaret Mary knew that his greatest desire, to spread devotion to the Sacred Heart, was still alive and all that was left of the stricken body and burning soul was dedicated even to his last breath to that sublime purpose.

It was late in August when Claude arrived at Paray. The journey had greatly fatigued him but he saw with contentment the familiar landscape, the large, powerful oxen in the green fields, the trees loaded with their harvest of fruits, the rolling hills and swift, foaming brooks. In the distance the towers of the old Benedictine Abbey were limned against the clear sky and there was the parish church, the Jesuit house and the Visitation convent. His heart leaped with joy, like an exile's returning from a long journey to the peaceful scenes of home. God was indeed good, for where else in his present condition was he better off than here. He was returning to the shrine of the Sacred Heart. He would be able, after he had rested, to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice at the altar where Sister Margaret Mary had seen the Sacred Heart. He would talk with the Sister herself. What more could he ask? Through pain and sickness, God had brought him back to Paray.

They were waiting at the Jesuit house for his arrival. He was helped in by kindly hands. The new superior, Father Bourguignet and another newcomer to Paray, Father Rolin, aided him to a chair. A little crowd gathered about the door. After a short while Dr. Billet hurried into the room. "Come now," smiled Father de la Colombiere, "my condition can't be that serious."

The physician gave him a reproachful look. "You never

would pay much attention to me," he stated. "But henceforth I will issue the orders."

"I can't help obeying," laughed Claude.

"And a very good thing that you cannot, Father. You must remain in bed for several days. I shall tell you when to get up. I shall see that you eat. You are here with my good friends and they will see that my orders are obeyed."

"Indeed we shall," the superior assured him.

"And no visitors for a while," said Dr. Billet as he left. He went thoughtfully up the narrow, winding street. It had been an effort to control himself when he saw Father de la Colombiere, for he was, indeed, a physical wreck. Impossible for him to last much longer. Oh, if only he had stayed in the bracing air of these hills and done nothing but eat the good, nutritious food, drank the rich, red Burgundian wine and the milk of the fat cows! But knowing Claude as he did, the doctor realized his patient would have been most unhappy in such an existence. Life was strange, very strange, reflected Dr. Billet. Believing in the Good God was the great lesson it had taught him. Claude would not live long in actual years but in accomplishments he had lived many lives. The deeds of such men were not for time but for eternity. Yes, it was quite true, the good lived on, though laid to rest in the bosom of mother earth.

Under the doctor's meticulous care, Father de la Colombiere quickly recuperated from the effects of his journey. His companions were very happy over his amazing recovery but the experienced physician knew this was only one of those occasional flashes of well being characteristic of tuberculosis. They were like little flames which sometimes flare up in the dying embers of a fire.

The heat of summer gave way to the cool, invigorating mornings and evenings of early fall. The thin, fresh breezes swept down from the mountains with a zestful tang. Green trees and meadows were changing into autumnal hues. All

the drowsiness of the hot season was gone, except for noon-day and early afternoon. The horses, the cows, the sheep and goats were more alert. There was a general quickening of all nature before the distant approach of frozen winter. People were busy bringing in the products of the fields. Stores were filled with good things to eat.

Claude was able now to take small walks. On all sides he was greeted with genuine friendship. Paray was happy to harbor this great and holy man. At last came a day of especial happiness when he offered the Mass in the Visitation Convent. The early sun splashed candlesticks and chalice with a golden shower. Claude thought how good it was to be here again and strange, too, after all that had passed since first he had met Sister Alacoque. She was kneeling with her sisters in religion behind the grille. And in the white Host which he consecrated was Jesus, in Whose Divine Heart they were again re-united.

There were other days when he celebrated Mass at the convent and there was that great day when he was made so happy by seeing Sister Margaret Mary. She is more like a citizen of heaven than ever, ran his thoughts. When I am near her, I apprehend God in a wonderful manner, as if by a reflected ray. Most sublime gift of all is to listen to her words, for she conveys the wishes and graces of the Sacred Heart. He has not fought in vain, she assures him. No, far from it. The fire which the Adorable Heart has cast upon the earth is kindling in many places through his zealous efforts.

Autumn is passing, the atmosphere growing colder. The frosts are here, the leaves are stained gold and red. The winds are rising and fogs curl up from the streams in the early hours. The year is dying and so is Father de la Colombiere. Yet the face of nature is beautiful, even resplendent.

Came a cold, still day when even the bright sun could

not bring warmth, for this was the icy breath of winter. The grass was blackened, the leaves had fallen. Claude sat in the convent parlor with Margaret Mary. He was very weak, his greetings no more than a throaty whisper. On her side of the grille, the nun was silent. It was a strange interview, the room so still that the ticking of the clock was most distinct. Scarcely a word passed between these two disciples of the Sacred Heart. Margaret Mary was not sorry for her friend. There was no time for grief, for she knew that this was her last meeting with Father de la Colombiere on earth. And although she was the tenderest of souls, no tear dimmed her eyes. Father de la Colombiere had been depending upon her since his return and now, with the power of her soul, she conveyed to him without speaking, what was in her mind. Too exhausted to carry on speech, he discovered to his inexpressible satisfaction that he was able to communicate his wishes to her. It was an amazing conversation in which intellect spoke to intellect. It was angelic.

They extolled the infinite merits of the Divine Heart, their unselfish devotion drove all else from their minds. Father de la Colombiere realized that soon his efforts must end but he rose to go with a feeling of supreme contentment. He found strength pouring into his frame. Sister Alacoque sank to her knees to receive his blessing. He raised his hand over her bowed head in a farewell salutation to his greatest friend and benefactor. He walked from the room and out into the sunshine. Margaret Mary did not go to the window to look after him but remained motionless. Had she done so, she would have seen him walking very slowly, no longer filled with energy but slowly disappearing down the narrow street. Sister Alacoque preferred to remember the soul into which she had looked. She was profoundly grateful for this last meeting in which she had been permitted to gaze into its depths of courage and

beauty. God had been good to her. His mercy was infinite. Never would the memory of this farewell fade in her heart.

On the third of December, the feast of St. Francis Xavier, Claude celebrated his last Mass. Sadly his companions carried him to his bed. The shadow of death was on his pallid countenance. The doctor was summoned. Yet despite his labored breathing, his eyes shone with calm fortitude. "I shall offer the Holy Sacrifice again," he gasped and tried to smile at the anxious faces.

"No, dear brother in Christ," said Father Bourguignet, pressing his hand. "The exertion is too much for you."

Claude shook his head. It was inconceivable that he had celebrated his last Mass but this was the beginning of his fatal illness. Never again would he put on the sacred vestments of the Holy Sacrifice, never again would he offer the bread on the paten, pour the wine and water in the golden chalice. Never again would he bend over the bread and wine, utter the words of consecration. There was a dreary monotony in the cry of the mournful winds about the house. They seemed to chant with his weary heart: "never again, never again," a melancholy dirge.

In the morning, a note was placed in his weak fingers by Father Michon. It was from Sister Margaret Mary, telling him to accept his fate, that God no longer desired effort on his part, that he had fallen an honorable, brave victim in the great spiritual combat. He was to await serenely the final summons.

To Dr. Billet's surprise Father de la Colombiere lingered on. His decline was progressive, only his courageous spirit kept him alive.

In all his experience, the doctor had never seen a similar case. Claude's life had been expended in the service of God and in these later years to an heroic degree. Now these remaining weeks were for himself. God decreed it that way.

The days dragged on. Paray was blanketed in heavy snows under dark, forbidding skies. Sometimes the sun would come out and create a glittering fairyland when the icicles would shine like diamonds.

Weaker and weaker grew Claude. His distressing cough forced him to sit up. He became helpless and had to be clothed, washed and fed. As before in England when he was stricken, his mind assumed a new force, a brilliant clarity. Once in a while he would try to write—the old habits still persisted but for the most part he was passive in the presence of God.

"He cannot last much longer, doctor," said Father Bourguignet one day in late January.

Dr. Billet drew his brows together in perplexity. "I have thought that for so long, Father, that I am beginning to doubt it. His vitality is so extraordinary. I've decided that a change of air might ease his condition."

And so it was arranged that Claude should go to his brother Floris' home at Vienna. Claude was not averse. Like many people near death he fondly recalled childish scenes. It was at Vienna he had made his First Communion thirty-one years before. Before departing he sent a message to Sister Alacoque. Amazingly, she answered that he should remain in Paray. Father de la Colombiere asked for pen and paper and scrawled a brief note, asking her the reason for such surprising news. With characteristic directness she replied: "He has told me that He desires the sacrifice of your life here."

Yes, Margaret Mary knew that it was necessary for Father de la Colombiere to die in Paray. Here was the foundation of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. Here the wasted frame should be laid to rest. From Paray his soul would go to the heavenly home prepared for it. Claude de la Colombiere was a saint, a great saint, one of God's chosen, who would in time become an historic figure. For-

ever his name would be joined with the Sacred Heart and Sister Margaret Mary. This trinity, divine and human, would kindle the universal and perpetual conflagration of love which would bring countless souls to God. Already that celestial fire was ignited in London's slums, in the palaces of kings, in cloister and school. The world was not yet aware of the rising flames but Claude de la Colombiere, dying there in Paray, knew with a certainty that was to sustain him in his final hours.

On February 15, 1682, his soul went out to meet that Heart he had loved and served so ardently. Soon the news spread over Paray and into the Visitation Convent. But there was one who knew without seeing, without hearing. The Divine Heart whispered it into Margaret Mary's soul. She was not to be disconsolate, for Father de la Colombiere had received the reward of a life of supreme holiness and he would be more powerful in heaven than he had been on earth. She would not be left a spiritual orphan, a deserted child. Father de la Colombiere was happy forever, his pure and noble soul would rejoice for all eternity whilst his worn body remained in Paray, a shrine for the weary and burdened.

And in England the Popish Plot had ended and Titus Oates, condemned as a perjurer, was sentenced to life imprisonment for his crimes. The last to shed his blood for the Catholic faith in England was an Irishman, Oliver Plunket, Archbishop of Armagh. He was executed at Tyburn on July 1, 1681, after a mock trial. But the tide had turned against Oates in 1680 when Viscount Stafford was put to death. Shaftesbury, too, had been repudiated and in the end was forced to flee to Holland where he died towards the close of 1682. But eight Jesuits, two Franciscans, five seculars and seven laymen had died on the gallows, while many more had perished in their filthy prisons.

Richard Langhorne and Father Baker were among the

martyrs. The Benedictine, John Wall, was executed in Worcester. Father Kemble, after imprisonment in London, was returned to Hereford, where he was put to death. Father Jennison died after a year in prison. His own brother, for whom he had renounced a handsome inheritance, had turned king's evidence against him. The Queen's chaplain, John Placid Adelman, died in prison under sentence of death. In Wales Father Philip Evans, the Jesuit, and Father John Lloyd were executed together at Cardiff. These and many more were the innocent victims of the infamous plot.

Triumph

XXIV

In May, 1684, Sister Marie-Christine Melin became superior of the Visitation Convent at Paray. Instead of following the usual procedure of electing a mother from another convent, the community chose one of their own nuns who had been professed in their own convent. At the time of her election Mother Melin was sixty-four, though she did not appear that old. There were no deep lines on her smooth face, her dark brown eyes were inexpressibly kind, her voice had a softly feminine timbre. Her movements had a quite definite deliberation, a peculiar efficient slowness. She was the type of woman who accomplished a great deal without apparent effort. The secret of her successful performance consisted in making no false moves. This virtue

was one of the reasons why she had not been made a mother superior earlier; her real merits lay concealed.

But there was another and stronger reason for her tardy promotion and that was her kindness, for Mother Melin was not only exceedingly kind by nature but her life in religion had doubled and trebled her sympathetic understanding. Unfortunately her type of character is considered lacking in firmness and a certain austerity which is so frequently found in many institutional heads. Thus, it was a matter of long years before this able, intelligent woman became superior.

True kindness may be blind to faults in others but it is always capable of seeing the good, which is frequently denied the critical. There is in genuine kindness that great element for happiness, the ability to create an atmosphere of friendship and good will. Kindness is creative and progressive. It wastes not a moment in useless criticism and idle, gossipy chatter. Sister Melin had been a powerful influence for good among the nuns at Paray but it had taken years to establish her true worth.

Margaret Mary had no better friend in the convent than the new mother. During all the sufferings she had endured through the misunderstanding, even malice, of her companions, Sister Marie-Christine had remained loyal. Her kind heart had pierced the clouds of suspicion which surrounded Sister Alacoque and she had always perceived the sun of truth. She had never considered the younger nun a dangerous visionary and impractical dreamer or a rule-breaker. Sister Melin knew more about Margaret Mary than any of the superiors, assistants or novice directors. Thus was her kind heart rewarded.

It was necessary for the new superior to appoint an assistant with the consent of her consultants. She named Sister Alacoque. She could not have selected a better person but her choice occasioned a wave of astonishment. Sister Mar-

garet Mary had never held but inconsequential offices, had even been removed as incompetent from the performance of menial tasks. And now, without any intervening promotions, she was to be elevated to assistant.

Of course, it would be highly improper to obstruct the very first appointment of the new superior; the choice was unanimously accepted. Many of the nuns now suddenly realized for the first time that Sister Alacoque was an important member of the community. The novices were delighted and the school pupils hilarious with joy, for all children felt an instinctive attraction towards Margaret Mary. Without being conscious of the fact, their innocent natures apprehended the remarkable innocence of her heart and responded to it.

All this happened overnight, following the expiration of Mother Greyfie's term of superiority at Paray and election as mother superior at Semur-en-Auxois. Sister Marie-Christine was astounded at being chosen to succeed her and Sister Margaret Mary was greatly confused at being appointed assistant. Neither wanted these offices and, if possible, would not have accepted them but the rules of the Order forbade any attempt to abdicate.

"I am afraid I shall be quite useless, Mother," said Sister Margaret Mary.

The superior laughed quietly. "You have been the candle hidden beneath the bushel, dear Sister Margaret Mary. Now that I have taken away the bushel, your light will be able to shine forth through the community. It doesn't greatly matter how you go about your duties, it's the spirit that counts. I am very confident of you. I know you will be a great help to me."

These words had the effect almost of a stunning shock on the new assistant. Her experiences had been rebuffs, commands, criticism and perhaps most difficult of all, calculated and deliberate trials to test her sincerity. Of course,

she had known all along that Sister Marie-Christine had been her true friend and defender but then she was only in a minor place. It was quite a different matter, now that she was elevated to mother superior.

"Oh, I would rather you would be harsh with me, Mother," cried Sister Margaret Mary with tears of gratitude.

Mother Melin did not know what to say, which caused her no little concern. Weren't superiors supposed always to know the correct thing to say and to say it emphatically and with great decision? Silently, she reached over and pressed Sister Margaret Mary's hand. When she had gone, the new mother had a bright thought which made her lips curve in a smile and even started her humming a little chanson of her girlish days. "I must be some good or God would not put me in this position. I am sure it is on account of Sister Margaret Mary. She is a very, very holy person and maybe God wants me to give her freedom. All these years of repression have developed her to a high degree of spiritual perfection. She is the candle and I intend to let her light shine forth. This must be the main reason why God has selected me for mother superior."

The thought was most pleasing to Mother Melin's humility. She was serving in her high capacity not through her own merits but for the advancement of another and through that other, the general welfare of the Paray community. Now Sister Alacoque would be duly recognized by the nuns, there would be no trouble. The past was past. Everything was going to be as bright as the sunshine outside her window and as peaceful as the sight of the filbert trees, standing so still and lovely in the grove. From now on, never would the convent be a scene of disunity. It was a good thing that Mother Melin could not look into the future for Sister Margaret Mary was soon to endure a new trial and be the occasion of much comment. The old diffi-

culties were to arise and make her what she abhorred, the center of attention.

Sister Alacoque had served about six months as assistant to the superior when the office of novice mistress became vacant through illness. As this is a most important part of convent life, it was quite necessary that a new mistress be appointed without delay. The future of the sisterhood depended on the type of novices produced. A fervent and wise nun, with skill in developing the young aspirants, must be chosen. It required very special qualifications.

Mother Melin sat in her chair, thinking. "This is the most important decision I have been required to make," ran her thoughts. "I must have the best nun in the convent. Sister Margaret Mary is the most saintly of all and besides the Good Jesus has given her wonderful favors. The younger religious love her. She would lead them sweetly and make virtue pleasant. Some might think a rigorist would fill the position better. Our life depends on the rule. That's the very essence of religious organization. Through the rules we climb the ladder to the summit of Christian perfection. Still one could be a rigorist and lack real comprehension of the basic cause behind the rule. Sister Margaret Mary has been severely criticized for failing to conform to the exact regulations of the order but such criticisms have been unfounded. She has never opposed the rules, she has transcended them. The rest of us can only feebly understand the great grace Our Lord has poured into her soul. She has known suffering and that makes for wisdom and loving understanding. Yes, Sister Margaret Mary is the very one."

The more Mother Melin considered Sister Alacoque as mistress of novices, the more satisfied she became. Her reflections were interrupted by a knock on the door and, at her invitation to enter, the novices came trooping in. They were hesitant in manner and Sister Francoise Rosalie who had already made her profession, was their spokesman. "We

have come, Reverend Mother, to make a humble request. We have prayed very hard to God that you will not refuse us."

Mother Melin smiled fondly on their young, unformed faces. It would be difficult, indeed, to deny them. "I am sure, since you have prayed so earnestly, that I cannot refuse you," she said gently.

Bright, eager smiles of anticipation replaced the hesitating looks. "We want Sister Margaret Mary for our mistress," they chorused. "Please grant our request, Reverend Mother."

"You shall have Sister Margaret Mary," agreed the superior, happy because the novices had voiced her own opinion. Her decision gladdened their young hearts as well as her own. Sister Margaret Mary would not want the office, considering herself far too lowly for such an important position, but when she realized the opportunity it afforded for training these young, impressionable characters through love of the Sacred Heart, her fears would be banished. Mother Melin leaned back in her chair. Now that she had resolved on Sister Margaret Mary as novice mistress, she was very content.

From the outset the new mistress of novices made an unsurpassed director of souls. Her knowledge of the spiritual life was far beyond any of her predecessors, however saintly. To be a good teacher requires the singular power of arousing a desire for knowledge in others and this faculty was natural to Sister Margaret Mary. "She will make us holy in spite of ourselves," cried one of her pupils.

She was that rare combination of boundless strength and inexhaustible sweetness. The foundation of her teaching was the Divine Heart of Jesus Itself. In the novitiate she found an opportunity to speak openly and freely on this devotion which had become the animating principle of her life. Despite her limitations, she was grateful, for she knew

that these young disciples of the Sacred Heart would multiply her efforts.

Never was the novitiate at Paray more pious and happy. Never were the rules obeyed with such zealous goodwill. For Sister Margaret Mary logically demonstrated that love of God, not self, was primary; that when the soul was deeply attached to God to the exclusion of all lesser desires, observance of the rule became a matter of course. So attractive had the novitiate become that even professed nuns like Dr. Billet's niece, Sister Claud Marguerite, and Sister Anne Alexis, a convert from Calvinism, asked to be re-admitted so that they might attend Sister Alacoque's discourses.

From a symbol of holiness and piety the Sacred Heart now became a living, burning reality in these young hearts. The novitiate of Paray was the center of that kindling fire which Our Lord desired to start on earth. Humbly, under His guidance, Sister Margaret Mary taught her young devotees, unfolding to them new depths of love and beauty and glory in the Adorable Heart.

The Feast of the Sacred Heart was observed for the first time in Paray's Visitation convent under the mistress of novices. With her own hands Sister Margaret Mary placed a black and white sketch of the Divine Heart on the little altar of the novitiate. The rest of the community proceeded on their usual way but the demonstration, circumscribed though it was, brought joy to Sister Alacoque and her disciples. It was a step forward, a triumph for the Sacred Heart, no matter how small.

In a few weeks came Sister Margaret Mary's feast day. What would the novices do for her? How would they honor her? She knew of their affectionate plans but what could better please her than to transpose their adulation to the Sacred Heart? And so it was arranged, for the novices desired above all things to make her name's day a most

happy one. She knew of their intention but only in a general way. All birthdays, and this was the novice mistress' birthday in religion, could not be celebrated properly without the element of surprise. It was quite permissible for Sister Margaret Mary to know in advance that they would honor her by honoring the Sacred Heart but just how they were going to do that was their own fond secret.

"Let us build a little altar," suggested Sister Francoise Rosalie, "a very special kind. Where the tabernacle door should be, we might have a little arched throne."

All agreed that the idea was fine. And the altar must be adorned with flowers, great red roses. Of course, too, Mother Melin would let them have the silver candlesticks. But the altar in all its perfection was only the setting.

"I wish we had an image of the Sacred Heart," sighed Sister Peronne.

"What better than the picture Sister Margaret Mary used on the Feast of the Sacred Heart," proposed Sister Claud Marguerita, who took part in this delightful planning.

Marie Nicole, a little postulant who had grown up at the Visitation danced about with joy. "Oh, it's going to be a wonderful day for our dearest mother, like a sky without a cloud."

Sister Margaret Mary's feast day was a memorable one but its complete happiness was marred by a painful incident. The entire community was expected to rejoice with her on this happy occasion, which prompted her to send an invitation to some of the older nuns to visit her little shrine and pray before it. Eagerly Sister Francoise Rosalie darted away on this errand of invitation, her young face beaming with a bright smile. How amazed and delighted the sisters would be when they saw the lovely little altar in its beautiful setting! Surely all would hasten to adore the Sacred Heart of Jesus and receive His blessing. Two of her companions followed, their thoughts of a similar nature.

"Behold This Heart"

The first sister they met was Magdalen des Escures, a nun with a strong, independent mind and ironical sense of humor. When Sister Alacoque had been severely criticized in her early convent days, this nun had held aloof. She did not believe that Sister Alacoque's strange transports were of a supernatural character, nor did she believe that the young sister was possessed by the evil one. She had never condemned her like the others of the community and as the years passed, she had grown attached to Sister Margaret Mary. Aware of this friendship, the novices did not hesitate in giving her an invitation. To their utter consternation, Sister Magdalen refused. Her voice was firm, her manner almost accusing. "Go tell your mistress that the best devotion is the observance of our rules and constitutions," she said with characteristic bluntness. "That is what she ought to teach you and what you ought to practice."

Sister Francoise Rosalie's face paled, her comrades were stunned. It was so unexpected and they were so confused that they did not obey Sister Magdalen's command. While they were hesitating several older nuns joined the group. Sister Magdalen tersely explained the situation and all voiced spirited approval of her attitude.

"New devotions ought not to be introduced—"

"The main thing is the rule. Innovations are dangerous—"

"Sister Alacoque is visionary and now she is making visionaries of the novices."

"A shrine to the Sacred Heart! Why, it's fantastical!"

These and other remarks dashed the spirits of the bewildered novices and sent them back to the novitiate with downcast faces and dragging steps. It was going to be a distressing task to report such messages to their dear mistress and above all on her feast day. It was cruel.

When Sister Francoise Rosalie looked into Sister Margaret Mary's lustrous eyes, so affectionate and so transported with happiness, she could not repeat the harsh words

with which the nuns had refused her sweet invitation. "The sisters cannot come," she stammered miserably.

The shining light in Sister Alacoque's eyes was suddenly quenched, she raised her chin and looked above the novice's head. She seemed to be gazing at nothing in particular. Sister Françoise Rosalie knew that she was deeply grieved and longed to say something comforting but a lump came in her throat.

Sister Margaret Mary lowered her head and looked deeply into the downcast faces of the little band. Her eyes were no longer sad, for now they glowed with prophetic vision. "The time will come when they will be most anxious to promote the devotion." And with this brief remark she dismissed the subject.

The novices were aware that their mistress possessed extraordinary graces. That she could look into the future did not astound them. All would be well. Now they could forget the scorned invitation and the hurt to their beloved mistress. Their smiles broke out again. But they would not have been so cheerful, had they known that a storm of opposition was rising against Sister Alacoque.

On the morrow the whole convent was rocked by blasts of fresh controversy, reviving the old arguments against Sister Margaret Mary, the mystic who did not belong among Visitation nuns. How regrettable that such a person had been selected to guide the youthful aspirants! The whole course of the Order in Paray was being deflected from the sensible rules of its foundation. Who was this Sister Alacoque that she dared to flout St. Francis and St. Jeanne de Chantal? The senior members of the community were more outspoken than the rest and openly complained in the mother superior's hearing against permitting the novice mistress to continue in office. Surely there must be some nun among the Paray community better qualified to mold the future sisterhood!

"Behold This Heart"

Mother Melin realized that the acrimonious debates were indirectly leveled at herself, for she had raised up Sister Alacoque from a lowly position to one of grave responsibility. In consequence, she was the ultimate cause of the disorder. She must act quickly for this state of affairs could not go on. She sent for Sister Alacoque. "May God forgive me for what I am going to do," she said to herself, for her sympathies were entirely with Margaret Mary. "I trust that it will be only temporary."

In a few moments the novice mistress presented herself. Mother Melin spoke abruptly, which was surprising as she was deliberate of speech and movement. "In the future, Sister Margaret Mary, please keep your little devotions to the Sacred Heart within the novitiate."

The words seemed like a rebuff but the mother's eyes were expressive of kindness. This was not a judgment but a compromise. Sister Alacoque obediently nodded assent, as if incapable of answering. The superior rose and walked to the window. Her own heart was grieved, yet this seemed the only course for the present. Sister Margaret Mary's first attempt to extend the devotion to the Sacred Heart beyond the confines of the novitiate had been laudable but the results were disastrous. The critical nuns must be satisfied and meanwhile Sister Margaret Mary could still teach her novices and await a more opportune time to spread devotion to the Divine Heart.

Mother Melin looked down at the children playing in the yard and wished that she were one of them. It would be nice to be a child again with no heavy responsibilities. She sighed as she turned back to her desk, for she had not solved the problem of Sister Alacoque, merely pushed it aside for the moment.

For several days the mother went about her customary round with an abstracted air. Since the mistress of novices was forbidden to talk of the Sacred Heart except in the

novitiate, the angry outburst was somewhat quelled but there were still grumblings from the nuns who openly disapproved of the devotion. Sister Magdalen, the leader of the opposition, stoutly maintained that the novitiate, of all places, should be rid of Sister Alacoque's doubtful innovations. "I like her very much," she stated in her downright, sensible way, "but I thoroughly object to her doctrines. Bad enough for the professed sisters to be influenced by Sister Alacoque's unorthodox views but far, far worse for the impressionable novices."

It was a most unhappy predicament for the peace-loving superior. And then, quite incredibly, came the solution of her problem with the arrival of a new book. When she saw it, Mother Melin's eyes lit with pleasure, for it was the "Spiritual Retreat" by the saintly Father de la Colombiere, published at Lyons after the author's death. She sat down and began scanning the pages, becoming fascinated with the work as she read on. Then suddenly her heart beat quickly, for there on the printed page was unfolding before her eyes the very means by which she could silence Sister Margaret Mary's critics. By a process of quick reasoning that was almost intuitive, Mother Melin decided on a plan so simple yet so effective that she found herself chuckling softly with relief.

Next morning, Mother Melin announced in the refectory that a new book, written by Father de la Colombiere, had arrived and she was laying aside the pious work they were reading so that they might hear his well-known and beloved voice, speaking to them as it were from heaven. There was one chapter which contained a special message for this very community of Paray and, accordingly, she was selecting it now. Calmly, almost indifferently, though inwardly she was pitched to a high key of excitement, the mother superior called on Sister Magdalen to read.

Surprise animated Sister Magdalen's broad, strong-

"Behold This Heart"

mindful countenance but she rose with obedient promptitude and walked briskly to the reading-stand. In her loud, clear, matter-of-fact tones she began: "I have seen that God wished me to serve Him by procuring the fulfilment of His desires regarding the devotion that He suggested to someone, with whom He communicates in confidence, and He has deigned to make use of my weakness for this end. I have already made it known to many people in England and have written it in France. Would that I could be everywhere, so as to make known, O my God, what Thou askest . . ."

The atmosphere seemed suddenly charged with suspense. The reader hesitated, then went on with suppressed excitement: "God having spoken to the person, who, we have reason to believe, is one after His own Heart, because He has given her great graces, she explained them to me, and I caused her to commit what she had told me to writing . . ."

The refectory became profoundly still, all knives and forks were laid aside or suspended in the nuns' hands. There was a strange quiver in Sister Magdalen's voice as she went on: "This person spoke thus: 'Being before the Blessed Sacrament one day during its octave, I felt urged to make Him some return by giving Him back love for love. Thou canst not make Me any greater return for love, He said, than by doing what I have so often asked of thee. Then, uncovering His Divine Heart, He said: Behold this Heart which has loved men so much that It has spared nothing, even to consuming itself . . .'"

The reader caught her breath in a sound like a sob. The eyes of the sisters, always cast down during the reading at table, were open wide and staring with intense expectancy at Sister Magdalen. She struggled for mastery over her emotion, her hand trembled so that she could hardly hold the book. Yet the printed words fascinated her and even

while she shrank from further betrayal of her agitation, her quivering lips ran eagerly on: "In return I receive from the greater number nothing but ingratitude because of the contempt, irreverence, sacrilege and coldness which they show Me in this Sacrament of Love. But what I feel most is, that there are hearts which are consecrated to Me that treat Me thus. Therefore, I ask of thee that the Friday after the Octave of Corpus Christi be set apart as a special feast to honor My Heart . . ."

The book fell from Sister Magdalen's hands, tears blinded her eyes and her head sank down on her breast. All eyes were suddenly turned on Sister Margaret Mary, who seemed completely overwhelmed by what she had just heard. Mother Melin touched her bell, indicating that the reading was over and Sister Magdalen walked with faltering steps to her place.

Impossible now for Sister Alacoque's companions to blind themselves to the great revelation. There could be no doubt that "the person with whom Our Lord communicated in confidence" was the one whom they had condemned and derided all these years. Father de la Colombiere's testimony supplied the real reasons for everything in her behavior that had seemed to them so baffling and irregular. He lived once more in his writing in order to bear witness to her sanctity and to the divine origin of her tremendous mission. The apostle of the Sacred Heart was in their midst, a humble, obscure being chosen by the Divine Saviour to reclaim a sinful world through the outpourings of His infinite and unquenchable love.

It was an overwhelming, a terrifying thought and all were shaken by it. The Sacred Heart had triumphed, at last, at Paray.

“I Burn—”

XXV

From the time when the Heart of Jesus began to be publicly honored and invoked in the Visitation convent of Paray, a new spirit of joyous devotion animated that community. Two years later, on the First Friday in September, 1688, the first chapel to the Sacred Heart was solemnly dedicated, a little shrine erected among the filbert trees on the very spot where Margaret Mary loved to pray and meditate and hold sweet communion with her Lord.

The entire community shared in the building of this chapel. The choir sisters called on their relatives for contributions, the lay sisters raised a considerable sum through the produce of the convent garden and the school children

denied themselves little pleasures to add their mite to the fund.

It was a simple, beautiful dwelling place for the Divine Heart. Dominating the interior was a single, large painting which filled the space above the altar. This captured the interest of all who beheld it, for the artist who executed it, had done so under the direction of Margaret Mary and the subject was original and dramatic.

In the center was the Sacred Heart of Jesus as It had appeared to her burning with celestial fire and encircled by a crown of thorns. Above was the Eternal Father, holding in one hand the globe and with the other unfolding a scroll which bore the words: "This is the Heart of My well-beloved Son in Which I am well pleased." The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove hovered above the Sacred Heart. Below on the right knelt Our Blessed Lady, her hand extended towards the Heart of her Divine Son in a gesture of invitation to return its burning ardor. On the left, St. Joseph held in one hand the lily whose open heart was like the Divine Heart to which he pointed with the other, as though saying: "Come, It is open to all." Beneath this celestial panorama knelt a figure in an attitude of supplication and confidence, eloquently symbolizing the soul which loves and gives itself to the Heart of its Saviour.

Sister Magdalen des Escures, completely transformed through grace, had begged permission to prepare and adorn the altar for the dedication. She had covered it with the finest of white linen cloths and embellished it with the most beautiful flowers from the convent garden—masses and masses of deep red roses. In the soft brilliance of candlelight they glowed like the very Heart of their Maker, their perfume mingling with the incense of adoration.

It was a blessed day, a day of excitement and rejoicing for all Paray. The mayor proclaimed a holiday and long be-

fore the appointed hour of one, when the ceremonies were to begin, an immense crowd had congregated. The priests of St. Nicolas and the cures from surrounding towns assembled in the parish church, where the procession started. When they reached the convent enclosure it was impossible to keep the throngs from pushing in with the clergy.

The small building was inadequate for such a huge gathering which thronged outside, trying to catch a glimpse of what went on within or listening to accounts from others. Yet it was a good-natured crowd, many yielding their places outside doors and windows to let their neighbors have a chance. The Sacred Heart and Sister Margaret Mary were on all tongues.

"She is a chosen one from heaven. Already she performs miracles."

"She even knows what goes on in Purgatory."

"Blessed, indeed, Paray to have the Saint of the Holy Marys."

These and similar expressions were continually heard. Sometimes in an excess of piety a peasant would beat his breast and fervently cry: "Long live our Saint." These shouts would arise above the deep murmur of the people, for crowds take on a peculiar personality of their own and this particular crowd was impregnated with emotions of joy, of admiration and of awe. Above, the sun and the clear sky looked down on this moving scene of devotion.

The services ended with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and a procession of the clergy yet the people remained. Now was the triumphant moment when Sister Margaret Mary would emerge and they could hail her as she passed along, perhaps they might even touch the hem of her garment, like the poor woman in the Gospel. Margaret Mary was so close to her Lord that she reflected something of His divinity. He had smiled upon her soul and the image of that smile was forever present. Thus Paray looked upon

Sister Margaret Mary. Man's greatest need is the apprehension of infinite good and today in little Paray the crowd was manifesting that hunger of humanity.

Yet the crowd was disappointed. Sister Margaret Mary did not appear but remained praying in the chapel. They were requested to leave. It was a sensible direction, not only because Sister Margaret Mary shrank away from all adulation but there was also the physical aspect. Frail and delicate, there was danger in the great numbers who would bar her progress towards the convent. The multitude was still in an excited mood. In such a circumstance, common sense dictated that the citizens quietly depart.

Slowly, reluctantly, the people left. The babble of many voices faded and the quiet became intense. It was this grateful silence which invaded the consciousness of Sister Alacoque. Now she could escape to the convent. With a last affectionate look at the Sacred Heart, she turned to leave the chapel. But all had not departed and left her alone with the Beloved Heart. As she approached the entrance, two men in the shadows rose from their knees and stood in her path.

Sister Margaret Mary drew back. She was not frightened but greatly startled. The taller of the two, a slender, grey-haired figure, was so like her dead father that she almost cried aloud in astonishment. The younger was chubby with a round, red face, and rather remarkable brown eyes that seemed to dance with inward vitality. It was amazing how much he reminded her of Uncle Antoine, especially as he was dressed in clerical clothes.

"Margaret," they simultaneously exclaimed.

It was her brothers, Chrysostom and Jacques. She realized that the years had slipped past very quickly; they were running along the road to eternity. Could this portly, rosy-cheeked priest be her little brother? And the middle-aged, aristocratic gentleman her childhood companion?

The brothers followed Sister Margaret Mary to a bench beneath a tree. They walked slowly, talking of family matters. Much had to be said in a brief time, every moment was precious. The Alacoques were people of deep and strong affections.

"Dear Margaret," said Jacques, "I want you to know that I have faithfully kept the promise I made to the Sacred Heart when I recovered from that desperate illness. Every Friday I celebrate Mass in honor of the Sacred Heart and on the First Friday of each month, a solemn high Mass."

"And I, too," broke in Chrysostom, "have fulfilled the pledge I made in thanksgiving for Jacques' recovery. The altar to the Sacred Heart is completed in our parish church. Oh, how I wish you could see how beautiful it is! I spared no expense, only the best went into the decorations."

Their sister glanced fondly from one to the other. Though separated by her cloistered life, her love for them had grown stronger and she was greatly pleased to know that their devotion to the Sacred Heart bound them still more firmly. This supernatural tie raised and consecrated their human affection to a high degree. God's comforting grace had taken their affection and nestled it on the threshold of heaven, even though they were still in this world.

How strong and sturdy Jacques appeared to Margaret. It was hard for her to realize that only a year ago, he had been snatched from death. The Sacred Heart had miraculously cured him.

As if reading her mind, which is not uncommon among people who love each other, Jacques smiled. "It was a miracle, so said the doctors. Look," and he exposed his strong white teeth, one of which was missing. "There's where they broke my tooth, trying to force my mouth open to feed me with a spoon. If you had not interceded with the Sacred Heart, I would not be here."

"Your time had not come," replied his sister softly, glanc-

ing at him with understanding. Before his illness, Jacques had been worldly for one of his high calling. He loved the luxurious things of life and liked to amuse himself at the races and at cards but everybody loved him in the parish, despite these worldly attachments. Children clung to his soutane and the poor had always found his purse open. Since his recovery his effusive spirits and gaiety were directed along spiritual lines. Some already considered him a jolly sort of saint.

"And how are my nieces and nephew?" asked Margaret Mary.

"All well," replied Chrysostom, adding with a sigh, "though they still miss their mother sadly."

Margaret Mary clasped his hand. "Angelique is happy, dear brother," she assured him. "No pain can touch her now."

It had seemed a long time to Chrysostom since his wife died, although it was only a year. He still longed for her. Angelique's death had been a great tragedy, for she had suffered agonies during her last years from an incurable disease.

"If she is happy, Margaret, that is all that really matters," replied Chrysostom, his face brightening.

"Her great physical sufferings were an earthly purgatory," said his sister. "She was ready to leave. God wanted her to come home."

Chrysostom bowed his head in understanding. Throughout his wife's illness, he had written to beg Margaret's intercession for her recovery. His sister had asked the Sacred Heart, instead, that Angelique might be given the grace to accept her cross with resignation to God's will.

When it was time to leave, they walked slowly towards the convent. In this short time they had plumbed the depths of human affection and risen to heights of supernal understanding. They had caught something of the infinite, di-

vine fire, radiating out from the greatest of all hearts. Their own hearts were warm, their faces lit with a beatific glow, reflecting the radiant gleams of the Adorable Heart. Even when they said farewell, it was softened by the invisible rays of an imperishable love.

Sister Alacoque turned slowly in at the convent door. Suffering and love were intertwined. One could bear anything for the Beloved. Nothing could crush love, nothing. It was a beautiful truth. For a moment she paused. She was thinking: "My work is nearing a close. I do not suffer any more. The devotion is firmly established. Is it time to go?" She was stirred deeply at the idea.

All during the evening meal, this thought filled her mind. It had been a gala day in the convent and consequently the rules were somewhat relaxed. Yet Sister Alacoque was oblivious of her companions, though she smiled gently when addressed. The public celebration had been her greatest triumph but all she thought of was the Divine Heart. That Heart was now beginning to be known. It was like the sun climbing towards the zenith. The grey dawns and early mists had gone. Now the world would see that Heart and feel Its warmth.

All days must end, whether joyful or sad, and night settled over Paray. It was natural for Sister Alacoque to find herself at the altar before the Blessed Sacrament. Long after the others departed, she remained, kneeling with her habitual erect carriage. When prayers were over, it was noticed that she did not rise with the rest. No one spoke to her, for this was her great day. Let her be alone with the Sacred Heart. It was proper for her to so end her day.

As Sister Margaret Mary knelt, she heard the voice of Jesus speaking in her heart and as the voice spoke, there was unrolled before her mind a vast panorama, black-robed priests and nuns and a huge concourse of peoples of every nation, moving past in an endless processional. She expe-

rienced an ineffable consolation, an ecstasy of recompense. The Heart of Jesus was making her comprehend the blessings It would pour upon humanity during ages yet to come.

The words fell upon her soul with indelible precision — the promises of the Sacred Heart, further pledges of Its divine compassion. As the voice spoke on, radiant beams splashed over the huge assemblage. And then the voice faded away like the faint sounds of some indescribable music and, as the voice died, the picture became indistinct. Sister Alacoque found herself in the chapel, gazing at the closed door of the tabernacle.

She knew what Our Lord wanted. She would write these promises so that all might benefit. It would not be difficult for they were deeply etched on her heart. She went to her cell and lighting a candle, sat down at her writing table and began: "My Divine Saviour has given me to understand . . . "

First she wrote briefly the promises of special gifts and graces to those who work for the salvation of souls and to religious communities. These were a reiteration of pledges made over and over again by the Divine Heart and she hurried on to those larger promises which reach out to encompass all mankind. "Persons in the world will find by means of this sweet devotion all the helps necessary for their state: Peace in their family, refreshment in their labors, the blessing of heaven on all their undertakings, consolation in their troubles; and it is chiefly in this Sacred Heart that they will find their refuge during all their life and especially at the hour of their death."

A smile illuminated her seraphic countenance as she wrote on, setting forth that sweet assurance of "every sort of blessing" upon the homes where the picture of the Sacred Heart shall be exposed and honored. Then followed the promise of love and grace for souls who consecrate themselves to the Divine Heart and sacrifice themselves to pro-

cure It all the honor, love and glory in their power. And in culmination those wonderful pledges which were destined to bring millions upon millions of souls to the Sacred Heart: the promise that all who shall be devoted and consecrated to It shall never be lost, and that all who communicate on the First Fridays of nine consecutive months shall be given the grace of final repentance and shall not die without receiving the Sacraments, for the Divine Heart shall become their secure refuge in their last moments. Oh, excess of loving mercy overflowing from the Heart of Jesus!

Margaret Mary dipped her quill in the ink and wrote: "Fear nothing, I will reign in spite of My enemies and of all who would oppose My reign . . .

"This Sacred Heart will reign in spite of Satan and of all whom he raises up to oppose it."

And as she ceased writing, she heard the voice of Her Lord repeat to her these words: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but not My words without effect."

Margaret Mary bowed her head in her hands and asked herself: Was not this glorious and tremendous manifestation a premonition of the end? The Divine Heart had shown her the future, had given her this commission which went out beyond the narrow confines of Paray and spread to the corners of the world. Now surely the end was approaching when she had no longer anything to do, when God was ready to let others take her place.

The veneration in which her companions now held her was an irksome trial. Margaret Mary abhorred being looked up to as a holy person, whose every speech was treasured as a golden maxim of piety. It was revolting to her in a way that the old humiliations and crosses had never been, for those she could accept as salutary for her soul's progress along the way marked by her Saviour's bleeding footsteps. But this adulation moved her to cry out: "Why do you hang on my words? I am the most unworthy nun in this

house. Never have I measured up in the smallest way to the multitudes of God's mercies."

"But Our Lord chose you for His revelations," her companions would insist.

"That does not make me holy," Margaret Mary would protest, "rather the reverse. Of myself I am nothing."

Yet the more she protested and fled from their homage, the more they showered her with praise and attention. As the highest mark of reverence, the community planned to select their saint for mother superior when Mother Melin's term of office expired. Learning of this, poor Margaret Mary was reduced to acute horror. She ran to the chapel and falling on her knees besought her Lord: "Is it possible, O my God, that Thou shouldst allow a creature like myself to be placed at the head of a community? I implore Thee to take away this cross from me. To any other I will submit."

Her plea was answered and Mother Catherine Antoinette de Chateaumorand was elected instead. A few weeks after the election, which took place on Ascension Thursday, 1690, Margaret Mary celebrated her forty-third birthday. It was July 22, the feast of St. Mary Magdalen, and Margaret Mary obtained permission to begin an extraordinary retreat of forty days. Our Lord spent forty days and nights in the desert preparing for his ministry. Margaret Mary was prepared for her entry into eternity. She wanted to be certain about her voluntary decision to die, to determine beyond all doubt that there remained nothing more to suffer for the Heart of Jesus.

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It is October, the sultry days have gone, and a delightfully cool, spicy tang to the air succeeds the oppressive heat of summer. It is time for the nuns' annual retreat. Sister Margaret Mary will not make that retreat. This she fore-

"Behold This Heart"

sees and even tells the infirmarian, Sister Catherine Marest. "It is now my turn to enter into solitude but it will be for the great retreat."

Sister Margaret Mary rises from her knees where she has been praying before the Blessed Sacrament. Her breathing suddenly becomes difficult. The door of the tabernacle, which hides the Immaculate Host, is vanishing, the altar is fading. A voice says in her heart: "Sister Margaret Mary, this is the last time you have looked on my prison door." She is faintly conscious of regret, never to see that tabernacle again, never to kneel before it. It is a last touch of the earthly, of the senses, however refined. There is a buzzing in her head, again she hears that voice but it is indistinct and muffled: "Soon, you will break through the flesh, soon you will see the Flesh and the Blood."

When she awakens, she is in the infirmary. Here she will die. The harsh struggle to take in air has gone, her head is clear, all her senses are alert. She recognizes Dr. Billet as he bends over her, a smile in his kind, quizzical eyes. He is telling the mother superior and Sister Catherine that she is not very sick. This, of course, she knows to be a mistake, for the Bridegroom has called her. She protests and is surprised at the strength of her voice. They do not believe her.

A few days pass. She has spells of difficult breathing, her head and side hurt her, the dizziness returns, but Dr. Billet has observed her symptoms in the past. He is not at all alarmed. She has been much sicker before. But Sister Alacoque knows better, her dark, liquid eyes are a mute protest at his verdict.

It is the sixteenth of October when Sister Alacoque begs for Viaticum. "No, my child," replies the mother, "you are not in danger of death."

"If I cannot receive Viaticum, please permit the chaplain to bring me Holy Communion. I am fasting," answers the

dying nun. For a moment her heart stands still with pain as her eyes desperately search the face of the mother with the pleading look of a wounded deer. The permission is granted and the chaplain brings her the Host. It is her last Communion.

And now all the symptoms increase. Her pain is severe and she cannot hide its torments. "Let me bring you something to ease your pain, dear Sister Margaret Mary," pleads the infirmarian. Margaret Mary shakes her head. "It is good to suffer at this moment, Sister."

The day passes. Although she is suffering, the doctor decides that there is nothing in these particular pains to remotely indicate that she is mortally ill.

Night falls. The community does not believe death imminent for their beloved saint but all are depressed. Voices are lowered, faces solemn. Word comes from the infirmary that Sister Margaret Mary desires to have her former novice, Sister Marie Nicole, to stay with her.

Sister Marie Nicole hides her tears when she approaches the bedside. "Little Aloysius Gonzaga, come closer," says Sister Alacoque. It was her pet name for the young nun. "I shall die of this illness and we shall not have very long to be together."

"Ah, no, no," exclaims the small nun. "You are not going to leave us yet." She is bathed in tears.

All during that night the little sister remains with Margaret Mary. She will never forget those tragic last hours. Forever will she remember the transports of love which pour forth from the lips of the saint. Many times Sister Margaret Mary uses biblical expressions. Then there is silence and a sweet ejaculation goes up to her Lord.

At last the cold grey fingers of dawn draw aside the curtains of night. Paray becomes visible outside the windows, the chapel of the Sacred Heart, the little cemetery, the filbert trees, the kitchen garden, now blackened by early

frost. The mother superior and several nuns enter. There is a change in Sister Alacoque which frightens them. It is but a passing condition in which Sister Alacoque blanches in terror and cries out: "Mercy, my God, mercy." And then quickly as it had come, the fear passes and an expression of serene content makes her face beautiful. Her voice is very clear as she exclaims: "I will sing the mercies of God forever."

Sister Catherine touches her face and feels her hand. She recognizes a new symptom, rising fever. After that joyous cry, Sister Alacoque cannot speak. Her chest rises and falls. Deftly the infirmarian props her up with pillows and she is relieved. Again she is able to speak. "Alas, I burn, I burn." But it is not of the physical she complains, for a few moments later she continues: "What a consolation it would be, if it were the divine love! But I have never known what it is to love God perfectly."

Again there is a little period of silence. Sister Alacoque makes an effort to rise and Sister Catherine pushes the pillows to a more acute angle. A smile of thanks flits across Sister Margaret Mary's face. From her new position, she talks to the sisters. "Ask pardon for me, and love Him with all your hearts in reparation for the moments in which I have not done so. What happiness it is to love God! Ah, what happiness! Love then this Love, but love Him perfectly." This is the depth of humility. The mother and little group leave. Sister Marest is certain that, despite the fever, there is not the slightest danger of death.

The day drags by, the sun lowers behind the hills. And as the day dies away, Sister Margaret Mary grows weaker. Her voice is very faint and the infirmarian must bend over to hear her. She is talking as if to herself, "We shall go into the house of the Lord." Sister Catherine becomes alarmed and hurriedly sends her assistant for the mother.

Could the doctor be wrong? thinks Sister Catherine. As

if in answer, she hears Sister Margaret Mary asking for Extreme Unction. In a few moments the mother superior arrives and glances sharply at the patient. "Bring Dr. Billet," she orders in a low voice.

Purposely she has spoken in hushed tones but with the acute hearing of the dying Sister Margaret Mary has heard. "Mother I have no longer need of anything but God alone, and to be hidden forever—" her voice breaks and then very clearly—"in the Heart of Jesus Christ."

The community assembles, for now they know this is the last hour of their saint. Sister Peronne Rosalie de Farges and Sister Francoise Rosalie de Verchere support Sister Alacoque with their arms as her breathing becomes lower and lower. They remember now that she once told them she would die in their embrace.

The prayers for the dying sound in a solemn dirge in the infirmary. The priest is giving the last anointings. Only one remains, and then Sister Margaret Mary's mouth opens and there comes forth a last cry: "Jesus." She is dead.

Her face is lovely in death, for a light shines on it. There is a strange perfume in the room, like flowers crushed in procession before the Sacrament. Dr. Billet comes running up the stairs. He glances at the still face. "She is with her Lord," he says.

As he turns to leave, a cry of wonder brings him back. Sister Marest has just unwound the bandeau across Sister Margaret Mary's forehead. The doctor looks down and falls on his knees. Perfectly impressed on the Saint's brow is the mark of God's love—a crown of thorns.